

VICTOR VICTORIOUS

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VICTOR VICTORIOUS

BY CECIL STARR JOHNS

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TO
IRMA

MY WIFE

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book was written in the spring of 1913--fifteen months before the outbreak of the present war.

September, 1915.

VICTOR VICTORIOUS

CHAPTER I

It was a magnificent tree, old and stately; it was, moreover, the first cause of grief that I can remember. Its foliage in summer afforded much shade, and in the

mornings when the sun was shining caused patterns to appear on the floor of my nursery; my sorrow was, that I could not fasten the pattern to the floor with tacks, tacks of the ordinary tin variety, which I had procured from goodness only knows where. I tried again and again, weeping bitterly at my want of success. I wept still more bitterly when my nurse returned; but that is a detail which has nothing to do with these memoirs, it is a sacred thing not to be spoken of lightly.

Such is the first of my remembrances, and I was then between three and four years of age. After that, my memories are confused and not particularly interesting, much the same, I daresay, as many millions of children can look back on: childish miseries, mishaps and pleasures, but always of the same place and the same people.

The house we lived in was not large, but the garden was; a splendid garden full of flowers, trees and shrubs, wild places and rockeries, while at the end flowed a tributary of the Thames, which to my childish vision was a most noble river. I imagine that its importance increased every time I was warned against going near the edge; and, as this injunction was repeatedly laid upon me, the Amazon or the Mississippi must have been mere streams in comparison. As, however, I obeyed and religiously refrained from falling in, I can only suppose that in those days I was singularly obedient, and also lacking in enterprise.

I remember my nurse; she was a most lovable woman, with a comfortable lap and nice kind arms. She let me have my own way; and I am sure I loved her very much.

Then, of course, there was my mother, but somehow my childish memories of her are vague. I fancy I was a little bit frightened when in her company, for no reason that I can recall, excepting the fact that she smiled so seldom.

And then there was my great friend, Bauen, a very dark and swarthy man who attended to the horse and pony. I loved him best of all. He was a peculiarly silent person, who never spoke unless directly addressed, and never wasted words when replying. He worshipped my mother and myself. I remember one occasion, when I attacked him with a switch because I was angry with him--I was only five at the time, so I could not have hurt him much--he just stood and looked at me, with his eyes full of tears, until I felt like a little beast and cried too, imploring him to forgive me.

I couldn't understand why, when I put my arm round his neck and kissed him, he only kissed my hand in return. That was the only time we ever had a difference of opinion, and I believe then only because I wished for the impossible. It was Bauen who first set me astride the pony's back and taught me most of what I know of horses and riding; knowledge which has been of great value to me.

He also would keep me quiet for hours with wonderful stories, of which he seemed to have a never ending supply, tales of giants and fairy folk, which I

know now were the legendary doings of the ancient heroes of his own country. It is wonderful to me that children can remember the fairy tales of their early years, and to this day I can recall my thrills at the story of the prince who turned himself into an ivy plant so that, when it had grown up a tall tower, a princess could use it as a means of escape. I had plenty of time to listen to these stories, for I never had any playmates of my own age. Not knowing the joys of companionship, I experienced no pain at the lack of comrades; nor were my days unhappy, for they were carefully arranged by my mother; so much work, and then perfect freedom to do what I wished, as long as I did not stray from the garden.

At an early age I could read and write, not English but French. My education at that time was a source of great perplexity to me: my infantile mind could never hope to understand the reason why, just when I was able to speak in one language, I was switched on to another; but so it was. In this way I learnt to a certain extent French, German, English, and lastly a language which my mother spoke when addressing her women, and which she assured me, one day, was the language spoken by the people of my own race: Rudarlian. I do not remember that this information added much to my pleasure in learning the language, I do not think that at that early age nationality troubled me a great deal.

However, I must have been born with a gift for languages, and they all came easily. In after years I appreciated the value of the teaching, for I found it had given me command over the subtleties of pronunciation.

Most of my days were spent in the following manner: I was out of bed very early, summer and winter, every morning starting with a cold bath and simple exercises; then came breakfast, after which half an hour was allowed for a scamper in the garden, a visit to the stables, and then work until eleven o'clock.

From eleven until one, my time was occupied by play and dinner, a meal rather too ceremonious for my liking; then, work again until two-thirty. Of course, as I grew older, these hours were altered, and my play was curtailed, a thing which did not cause me any unhappiness, as I loved my books, chiefly owing to the intelligent methods of instruction, which leads me to further acquaintances--two men.

One, about forty-five years of age, appearing considerably older on account of his grey-tinged hair, came to visit my mother once every year.

At first whenever he came my mother appeared unhappy; so much so that when I was six I connected his appearance with my mother's tears, and threatened him with I know not what. She, however, put her arms round me and assured me that Mr. Smith was the best friend she had.

Mr. Smith--Mr. Smith. In those days I never thought that I should owe you so much.

He it was who introduced Mr. Neville to my mother.

Mr. Neville became my tutor. He is another to whom I owe much, very much, but my indebtedness to him is of a different kind from my indebtedness to Mr. Smith.

I was eight when my tutor appeared upon the scene; tall and broad-shouldered, a fine athlete, an ex-university don, and, as I found later, strong in every sense.

He had a method of teaching peculiarly his own, simple, practical, and yet full of the most complete wisdom. His teaching awoke my childish interest; under his handling, dry facts of history became fraught with vivid life, and that perhaps was the study which fascinated me the most. He showed me the indirect effects of various actions, proving how nearly always they are more potent and far-reaching than the direct. Dates, the plague of most childish brains, he never troubled about.

With wonderful word pictures, he conjured up before my eyes the lives and deeds of long-dead heroes and monarchs, pointing out their failings, explaining their actions. His knowledge was vast, I realise that now; he would encourage me to observe everything, and he was never wearied of explaining the why and the wherefore.

In matters geographical it was the same. Not content with teaching me the names of cities, rivers, etc., he would take me mentally to the places we spoke of, informing me of their imports, exports, mineral wealth, and chief manufactures, giving me brief historical lectures to explain the reason for certain boundaries, describing the lives, rural and urban, of the inhabitants, discoursing on their modes of conveyance, fighting power, anything--everything. He assisted his words with photographs. Perhaps if I had had boy companions, I should have been a worse pupil; I don't know. As it was, I sat, metaphorically speaking, in rapt adoration, drinking in his words, remembering much, thank God.

Even arithmetic was made interesting after I had mastered the first simple rules. Owing to the thorough grounding I had from him, I seem all my life to have had a deep sense of arithmetical proportion, not only in figures but in the events of every-day life.

His lessons were short; I was never given more at one time than I could assimilate; the moment that he noticed the slightest falling off of my attention he would cease. "Now," he would say, "that's enough for the moment, let us go and exercise our bodies."

Away we would go, in any weather, for a walk or swim, a ride, or row up the silent little stream. Even then my instruction went on, not that I was aware of it at the time, but by subtle little observations which led me to ask questions and take an interest in all forms of life.

When he came, I saw much less of my mother; she was a great many times away from home, sometimes for days, sometimes for months. In my childish

way, I observed changes in her, not in her manner to me--that was always kind and affectionate, though withal a trifle stately--but in appearance.

She dressed more in colours, and seemed gayer and less wrapped up in her own thoughts. With perfect confidence I mentioned my thoughts one day to Mr. Neville, but he laughingly declared that it was owing to his presence, as now she had not the worry of looking after me.

"I did not think that I was a great worry," I said innocently.

"No, my boy, I don't imagine you could have been," and his hand rested a moment upon my head. "So we must look elsewhere, mustn't we?"

"Yes, but I should like to know, because I might help."

"Not at present, I think; some day, perhaps, when you are older. You see, your mother has had a great deal of trouble in her life, but even troubles lose their poignancy after years; so take my advice and wait patiently. When the time comes you will be told without a doubt."

By this time I had such absolute faith in my tutor that I accepted what he said without hesitation; and thought no more of the matter.

When I was ten years old, a great change took place. My mother married again--an American.

It came quite suddenly, this marriage. I had no idea, no thought of possessing a stepfather; presumably, I was too young to understand or be bothered with information.

My own father was more of a myth than a reality; I had no memory of him, he was rarely mentioned by my mother, and my nurse would only answer my questions concerning my progenitor in a vague manner. That he had been a soldier, I gathered from the fact that he had been killed at the head of his own regiment; Mr. Neville had told me that, during a lesson dealing with the history of Rudarlia.

Had I been older, I might have wondered at the way in which I was taught the intimate history of such a small kingdom, far more minutely, indeed, than that of great powers like England or France.

During this lesson I read that King Merlin I of Rudarlia had been killed in a revolution, his cousin ascending the throne.

"I wonder if my father was there?" I asked.

"Yes, he was there."

"Was he a soldier?"

"Yes."

"Did he get killed?"

"Yes, he was killed at the head of his regiment."

"Oh!"

I remember that, in my dreaming for months after that, I pictured a man

resembling in turn Mr. Neville and Bauen at the head of a magnificent regiment, charging, killing, and behaving like one of those old heroes with whom I was familiar.

But to return to my stepfather. He was a man of about fifty, very tall, and handsome, possessing the musical, low-pitched voice of the Americans from the more Southern States.

At first his coming made little difference to me, I accepted his presence in much the same spirit as I accepted most things; Mr. Neville and my mother were there, so it must be all right.

I can see now that it showed consummate tact on his part to behave as he did to me. He never sought me, never objected to my presence with my mother, never assumed any kind of parental prerogative; but, instead, suited his conversation to my understanding, asked my opinion gravely in small matters, and related many tales of adventure, in such a way as to leave me ready for more. Above all, he made me realise that he would like my affection.

He it was who gave me my first horse. I had always ridden the pony, so it was a great joy to me to be able to accompany Mr. Neville on an animal equal in height to his. Then again, it was my stepfather who first taught me to box, use the rapier, and shoot with a revolver, himself superintending my efforts with the greatest care; until from being a stranger he became a friend, one whom I could love, trust, and admire, nearly as much as Mr. Neville. Whenever I think of those two men, my thoughts are almost hushed, they were so good, so kind, so perfectly unselfish to me, with no ulterior motive besides my well-being, both for the time and the future.

They gave me of their best, mentally, physically, and morally.

Perhaps the chief thing I learnt from them was a sense of duty. Whenever there was something to be done, each put the question before me, for me to decide whether I considered it obligatory on me. They would advise thought first before deciding, and then would say no more. They were very good friends, these two.

Mr. Smith continued his yearly visits, but now each time he came the three men and my mother would hold a solemn conclave from which I was excluded.

He was becoming to me something more than the apparition of former years, as he would talk more to me, showing a considerable amount of interest in my studies, and would ask permission to send me books, which were mostly stories of war.

War was a subject which appealed to me, for my feelings towards soldiers were almost sacred.

My stepfather had given me a great number of small leaden warriors, and I fancy that he must have had them made for me, as they were absolutely complete in detail. They consisted not only of the actual fighting men, but artillery,

commissariat, red-cross waggons, and engineers.

With these, when the weather permitted, we would adjourn to the garden, and on a patch of rough ground fight out the great battles of history.

Perhaps ten little pieces of lead counted as at regiment, or one small brass cannon a whole battery; it did not matter, the main thing being that the opposing armies should be as near as possible to the actual strength of the armies they represented. It would have amused people perhaps to have seen the group we made: two elderly men and one small boy absolutely engrossed in their game; if it could be so termed.

Personally, I have never underrated the effect it had on me, and I trace the success I have met with in real warfare to the accuracy and care we expended on these occasions. Naturally many questions had to be asked, and these were generally answered by my stepfather, who was a great authority on all things pertaining to war. How he could make the necessary leisure to play with me I cannot understand, for his must have been a very strenuous life, although I did not realise it at the time.

Two more years went by, and then I was informed that it had been decided to send me to school, an idea which at first did not greatly charm me. It had never entered my head that I should ever be a schoolboy, it had seemed to me that I was apart somehow from all other boys, and although I had read books of school life, they had never appeared real to me, most probably because I had never known anyone of my own age.

When the thought obtained a firm footing in my mind, it began to wear a more interesting aspect, for I conjured up alluring adventures, and finally grew to like the idea so much that I was all excitement for the entrance examination.

The only drawback that I could perceive, was the fact that I should have to leave Mr. Neville, and my mother and stepfather. It was difficult to conceive life without them, but they one and all pooh-poohed that side of it, and told me that it was high time that I got away from their apron strings. In spite of this Spartan argument, I know they were very sorry when the day came for me to depart.

I passed my entrance examination too well, rather too brilliantly, and was therefore put into a class with boys a good deal my senior; consequently my first term was not all my fancy had painted it. At first, I foolishly imagined that school was the place for work, so endangering my reputation by being looked upon as a "swot," and something of a prig. Realising this and recognising my shortcomings, I scrupulously refrained from working hard and devoted myself to games.

The senior I fagged for was a nice, kind chap who treated me with great consideration for the first few days, but after that he treated me in a way that was essentially good for my soul. He did, however, explain many little difficulties in regard to games and encouraged me to go in for them hot and strong.

With the majority of my schoolfellows I was on good terms; I had the usual number of scuffles which could not be called fights, only one coming under that category; that was with a fellow whom I disliked heartily, for no particular reason; he returned the feeling and tried to bully.

We therefore set to in good earnest; he was two years older and a good deal bigger; it is undoubtedly true that I should have received a thrashing, had it not been for the tuition I had received from my stepfather. I held my own for ten rounds, when we were stopped by a prefect. I had a beautiful black eye and a cut lip, as well as sundry bruises. My opponent, ditto, ditto; he looked worse, however, because he was full-blooded.

My reputation went up enormously after that. We never finished that scrap, but used to conduct ourselves civilly towards each other. It is wonderful how a tussle can clear the air.

I made a friend that day, Rupert Carruthers, the second son of the Earl of Yelverton. He is still my friend.

My stepfather was delighted when he heard of this fight, and joked with Mr. Neville about it.

"We shall have him in the ring one of these days, eh, Neville?"

"Ah! he might be happier so." A remark which at the time was unintelligible to me.

I do not think my mother was pleased, she said nothing.

These were very happy years; I did as little work as I could, but I played games with every ounce in me, hence I became a good all-round athlete.

In the holidays I studied with Mr. Neville to make up my lapses of the term, and I found it quite enjoyable; he always had the power of making me think more clearly than anyone else ever had.

My stepfather encouraged me in sport of all kinds, boxing, foiling, swimming, rowing, and shooting. He had had a magnificent gymnasium built in the garden and had also rigged up a shooting range for revolver practice.

I believe if I had been the veriest fool and lubber, these two men would have made me different.

My great chum, Carruthers, and I were inseparable, and sometimes exchanged visits to each other's homes. I remember the first time he came to our place; when we went to bed he slipped into my room, which adjoined his, to have a chat. We could both of us do well in that line. This night, however, he did most of the talking, chiefly eulogising my stepfather and Mr. Neville; he spoke with a keen appreciation of their qualities, especially of those I most admired in them; which showed, now I think of it, a perspicacity I had not credited him with.

My mother had received him kindly, but with that unapproachableness which often mystified me; and he was almost shy when speaking of her. I chaffed

him about his nervousness when she asked for an explanation of the nickname he always used when speaking to me: "Splosh." Of course he could not give any reason, as there was none to give; but he managed to murmur that I was called Splosh, by every one, because I looked like it.

This lucid explanation was sufficient and convulsing for my stepfather and Mr. Neville, but did not seem to charm that dear mother of mine.

Carruthers' last remarks that night were: "What a lovely mother you have, Splosh."

"Yes, she is," I said.

"I think I should be scared of her."

"Why?"

"I dunno, but I should. Good night."

If he had waited, I might have confessed that sometimes I felt the same myself.

Mr. Smith came for his yearly visit that month; he took quiet notice of Carruthers.

Towards me his manner had changed slightly. He was, I thought at the time, rather ceremonious; but he gave me some splendid lessons with the foils, and I forgot about it. He stayed longer than usual, and his conversations with my mother were more drawn out.

It was about this time that a vague feeling first entered my head about my mother; I fancied there was some mystery attached to her, and I in no way desired that such a thing should be. The strange reticence every one showed when I endeavoured to ask questions about my family, the periodical visits of Mr. Smith, the care taken to exclude me from all their conversations, all these things made me wonder, and then Carruthers asked me one day to show him a picture of my father.

Picture of my father, picture of my father? I had never seen one; it struck me that this was extraordinary, almost as extraordinary as the fact that never before had I wished to see one. There had never been one that I could remember, no painting, drawing, not even a photograph, but I did not like to tell Carruthers that, so I made some excuse, and slipped away.

The desire to know what my father looked like became very strong, mingled with a feeling almost of shame; he may have loved me, petted me, planned out my future, and yet I had never given him more than a passing thought. In fact, I had grown to look upon my stepfather as my real parent and certainly cared for him that way.

When I slipped away from my chum, I got into a boat and pulled up the river to my favourite lounging place, and then I spent an hour or two, lying on my back, staring at the sky and vainly striving to explain what now I was convinced was

a mystery. I recalled the early visits of Mr. Smith, when my mother used to cry; could it be that my father had committed some crime? Surely not, but why was he never mentioned, why were there no pictures of him in the house?

I was in a mood full of curiosity, but this soon changed to one of anger, I don't quite know why, unless I thought that I was old enough to be told anything there was to know.

In this angry state I rowed back and stumped straight up to the house, no doubt with great dignity.

My mother was sitting talking to Mr. Smith and my stepfather.

"Why, Victor, how flushed you look; is there anything the matter?" asked my mother.

"Can I speak to you a minute, mother?"

"Of course, what is it?"

I blushed furiously, and blamed my own precipitation. Why had I not waited a better opportunity? I could not ask the question I wanted to ask with the others there; but I had to say something, and so blurted out:

"Oh, it does not matter now, mother."

I believe that Mr. Smith made a sign to my stepfather, because they both rose, and, after mentioning billiards, disappeared.

I glanced round hurriedly; this was better.

"Mother."

"Yes, Victor."

"I want to see a photograph of my father."

Her face grew very cold and stern. Without a word she got up and walked slowly into the house; I followed. In her boudoir she handed me a miniature--I did not look to see where she took it from--and so, for the first time that I had remembrance of, I saw my father's face. I don't know what I thought of the face, but the eyes were kind eyes. I stared long and fixedly at the miniature; various feelings surged through me, far too subtle to describe.

At last I handed it back.

"Thank you, mother," I said.

"Is that all you wished, are you satisfied now?"

"No, I can't say that I am satisfied, because there are so many things I wish to know; is there any reason why I should not be told about him?"

"There is, Victor."

"But it is nothing wrong, is it?"

"Wrong? My God! yes! it is wrong, but it does not take from your father's name. Listen to me, Victor; you are growing into a man, when the time comes, you shall be told many things, until then wait patiently, my boy, I promise that

you shall know everything."

CHAPTER II

I now knew that there was something mysterious about my parentage--the interview with my mother had at least settled that point--but all the certainty in the world could not prevent my mind continually turning to it, and this had rather a curious effect upon me: it made me quite humble-minded. I do not mean to imply that my normal state was bumptious beyond the ordinary, but it had a chastening effect upon my mind. I disliked the thought of the unknown. I desired to have a father whom I could speak of without any kind of doubt. As it was, I found it necessary, upon several occasions, to slur over any allusions to him, and school-boys are not always tactful in their dealings with reticence. However, the fact that he had been a soldier generally proved sufficient to satisfy the curiosity of the inquirer.

Another thing which annoyed, or rather chafed me was the length of time that must necessarily elapse before I could know, for I had no doubt that it would not be until I came of age.

My disturbed state of mind did not prevent me enjoying my life immensely; and at eighteen I found myself in a very enviable position in the school, and one which I believe was a record in its way, for I was captain of the school, and also captain of the cricket eleven. I may say that the latter was by far the more important post in my eyes, and certainly much the nicer.

I take no credit for being the best boxer and fencer in the school, for I had done both since very early childhood, and had had most excellent instructors.

It was a great shock to me to learn that I was to leave school, it seemed to be the most complete upheaval I had ever experienced. I hated the idea, it caused me an infinite amount of real trouble to get myself into the proper frame of mind to behave decently about it. Yet, had I thought, I might have recalled numerous hints that I had received from my people, and which would have prepared me better; presumably I had been so engrossed in my own little affairs that I had not paid too much attention.

I shall never forget the last day of that term, I felt as though I was going to execution, and absolutely beastly; had I been a girl I should have cried my eyes out. With the eyes of my world upon me, however, I had to make a brave

show, and say good-bye to every one and everything; and lastly I had to have an interview with the head-master. I had, naturally, had much to do with him as captain of the school, and we were very good friends.

He was a short, thickset man with a great white beard, who bore a tremendous reputation for severity among the boys; but those among them who got to know him found a warm-hearted, kindly, genial man. After speaking with me for some time he said good-bye, adding a few words which I shall never forget.

"My boy," he said, "I have this to say to you: no matter where you are, or what befalls you, remember that over us all, king or peasant, there is God. Turn to Him in your troubles, thank Him for your joys. That you will do your duty through life, I feel assured, however hard it may be, however irksome. The love you have inspired in your comrades will, I hope, be inspired by you in the world; I, and others, will pray for you in the future. May God keep you in his sight."

I could not help wondering, as I left his study, why such emphasis had been laid upon my future. What did it portend, did the head-master know anything of which I was ignorant perhaps, for since my interview with my mother two years before, I had made no further inquiries.

When I was home again, I found that they were beginning to treat me as a man; and for three months or more I spent my time in sport. By which I do not mean killing things, that was a pursuit I never really cared for.

Towards the end of this time Carruthers paid me a visit from Sandhurst, into which he had passed a year or so before I left school; after his visit I began to wonder what I should do with my life. His stories of the great military college had fired me with a desire for the army.

It was after dinner some three nights following his departure that I broached the subject of my future.

"I wish to know what vocation you think I am suited for?"

I spoke collectively. My mother gave a little start, looked quickly at my stepfather, gave a little sigh, and remained silent.

My stepfather smiled a trifle grimly, he too did not speak. Mr. Neville, however, answered me.

"What do you yourself feel inclined for?" he asked.

"I hardly know. You see, I have never thought much about it until lately; but it seems to me, that now I have left school, I ought to do something to be independent."

"There is no need of that, Victor," said my stepfather. "Would you not be content to stay here, and wait for a little?"

"If I did, it would prevent my going to Sandhurst."

"Aha! that was in your mind then. I rather suspected it. Rupert's reports, eh?"

"Yes," I said. "It seems a nice life, and I might do well as a soldier; what do you think?"

My mother leaned forward.

"Victor, do not set your heart upon it, I think that it will be impossible."

"Oh, am I also to know the reason for that, some day?"

"Yes," she answered, "that goes with the rest."

"Well, I shall be very pleased when that day comes."

"Ah!" said Mr. Neville. "I wonder."

We sat silent for a while, and then I said again:

"What am I to do? You know, I am completely in the dark about everything. I have been supplied with money, it is true, but is it mine, or is it yours, mother? These things ought, I think, to be explained to me. Shall I have some day to work for a living, or do I inherit anything when I come of age, because I feel that, in the latter case, I can take a course that will be totally different to what it would be supposing I had to earn bread and cheese."

My stepfather had risen and was walking up and down the room.

"I quite see your point, my boy," he said, "and I think that you are of an age to understand me, when I say that you will never want in the future: you will inherit a certain sum on coming of age, which will be enough to keep you handsomely in any ordinary way. When I die, you will have everything of mine, and I trust you will then be in a position to make good use of it. That, I hope, is sufficient to say about financial matters; about your career, it is more difficult. If I were you, this is what I should do: I should ask Mr. Neville to come with me and should then take a continental tour. See everything, meet everybody, acquire a knowledge of mankind, virtues, and vices. Spend money when you think good may come of it; read and digest history as you go, also national law, and natural law; gain as much knowledge as you can of affairs military; study arms and armaments, from cutlasses to cannon. Your cadet corps has given you a capital foundation to work on. Then in two years return to us. That is my advice, and I know your mother will agree."

"Yes," said my mother a trifle sadly, "I agree."

"But could you not give me some idea, so that I may study for my future as well as all those things you mention?"

"I believe that if you study those things, Victor, they will be of immense importance to you in what I hope will be your career. You may trust your mother and myself to give you the best advice we can."

"Of course I do," I said, "but it is puzzling, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is, but this you may count on: you shall know everything you wish when you come of age," said my mother.

"Thank you, mother." I turned to my old tutor. "Mr. Neville, will you come

with me?"

"I will," he said. "It will be a pleasure for me to renew my acquaintanceship with the continent."

"Then let us go; and, for my part, the sooner the better, for the time will pass more quickly."

"Don't forget the old advice to 'hasten slowly,'" my stepfather remarked.

"To-morrow," said my mother, rising, "we will plan out your tour."

I went to bed that night with fresh fields of thought open to me. I was now to see all those places of which I had read and heard; I was to study everything. The thought flashed through my brain, that from this advice I ought to be able to glean something of my parents' views for my future, which I immediately tried to do, but without any satisfactory result. I wondered whether they wished me to enter the diplomatic service; but, if that were so, why be mysterious about it? It was a perfectly feasible career to anyone like myself. I was pleased with this idea, and indulged in a little fanciful dreaming, seeing myself as an ambassador, carrying through some skilful piece of diplomacy with great success. I believe that this was still in my mind when I fell asleep.

The next week passed in a whirl of preparations. It was decided that we should go first to Paris, and then roam wherever we willed, to St. Petersburg or Rome, to Egypt or Iceland.

For the first time that I can remember, my stepfather spoke to me of money.

"Victor," he said, "it is necessary that you should acquire a knowledge of the value of money; I don't mean of pennies being saved to make pounds, but I wish you to get used to the handling of large sums, to appreciate what such sums can buy. It is an extremely difficult thing to discover the best method of learning this; I believe there is no certain way, it depends so much on the individual. I don't fancy that you have ever been in debt or money difficulties, have you?"

"Never, you gave me such a ripping allowance, I never spent it all."

"Didn't you? All the better, it proves that you are not thoughtlessly extravagant; but I don't wish you to be too careful either. I want you to be so used to handling and spending money that, if, in the future, the occasion arises where it is wise to spend a big sum, you will do it without hesitation; for delay often spells ruin. Now don't forget, I want you to spend money, as much as you like, ten, thirty, fifty thousand pounds, if you wish; and, my boy, I will confide in you this much, if you spent twice that sum, I shouldn't feel it."

"You must be jolly rich then," I said, although I only vaguely realised the position.

My stepfather smiled.

"I am, but I don't wish people to know it."

I have often wondered what other young men of my age would have felt

under similar conditions.

To be invited to spend as much money as they liked, to have it made a point almost of favour that they should do so.

I suppose their thoughts would have run wild on all kinds of imaginary delights, and pastimes; as for me, I hardly felt even a passing thrill at the prospect. I had always been lavishly supplied with money, and strangely enough had no expensive tastes or habits; I needed very little to make me happy. As it was, I gave my word to spend whenever I could. But I could not help laughing as I did so, it seemed so funny.

"Possibly I may have this explained when I come of age," I remarked.

My stepfather laughed.

"Yes, I think so, Victor."

* * * * *

I do not intend to give an account of our tour, the places we went to can be read of in Baedeker, or other guide books, that is, for the most part. We did go to some small places out of the regular beat, but nothing extraordinary happened.

We visited France, Germany, Italy, Russia, during the first two years, generally making Paris our head-quarters.

I followed strictly my stepfather's advice, studying everything and everybody. In those two years I must have shed at least seven skins of ignorance, and acquired seven others of knowledge, and, with the knowledge, understanding.

Naturally, Mr. Neville being with me aided me enormously; without him, I should no doubt have profited far less. He it was to whom I turned continually for guidance and explanation. When I say guidance, I mean mentally, as in all decisions of a physical nature I was made to decide myself.

In each country, as we visited it, he pointed out in his lucid way the chief points of government, and many were the discussions we had over the selection of the finest.

At first, I remember, I was inclined to favour theories, but before his searching dissection they very soon crumbled away.

We had many letters of introduction to notable people, wherever we went; and these enabled us to obtain a grasp of the real life of all classes, for we invariably found some one who could and did act as guide.

Sometimes we would go for a walking tour lasting a month or six weeks, sometimes we would motor through a great tract of country, barely stopping a day in any one place.

We met many people, young and old, men and women, and as my mind expanded I seemed to read their characters, recognising their virtues and their

vices, carefully stowing the results of my investigations away in the recesses of my brain. I was repeatedly told that I was handsome, sometimes subtly, more often quite openly. This was news that failed to interest me.

Women with languorous glances, or carefully dropped eyelids, had little fascination for me; and so I passed through, unscathed, what would have been irresistible temptations to many.

Perhaps I was cold by temperament, or perhaps my upbringing had taught me to avoid such pleasures, or, again, perhaps I was simply waiting for love to come to me.

Now although, as I say, I evaded these things, I take no credit to myself; they were not for me, that was all.

I did not quite understand myself then, and I find it hard even now to say what prompted me to keep sexually clean. I in no way avoided opportunities, as in my desire for knowledge I would often with some acquaintance or friend visit the haunts of the *demi-monde* and underworld; I do not say it was necessary to seek such opportunities. The society we naturally consorted with differed strangely little in essentials.

I have seen a man, head of a noble family, deliberately cheat at cards; and I have experienced the disagreeable duty of refusing the amorous advances of more than one *grande dame*.

I, personally, find much blame for the man, and very little condemnation for the woman, for the craving of sex must be the most difficult of all to fight, and conquer.

As I have said, we studied four great nations in two years, superficially, of course; but the knowledge we gained was good. One subject in particular I had given my whole attention to, whenever possible: war, chiefly in the way of preparation for attack or defence.

It was extremely interesting to me to discuss with Mr. Neville, or with a soldier if possible, the defences of any place.

Of course, as outsiders, we were never allowed to inspect any of the fortified places of Europe, but we would discuss them nevertheless, and I was always trying to find the best plan of defence for these places. The military portion of the friends we made seemed much amused with me; I don't know why, unless it was my eagerness. All the same they entered into the fun of "drawing a civilian," and bantered me unmercifully, which I know was excellent for me.

I remember once, when motoring through France, entering into a heated discussion with a celebrated French General; I refuse to allow for one moment that I wanted to lay down the law, although Mr. Neville did suggest it afterwards. This General, no doubt immensely amused by me, pulled out a map of the district through which we were travelling.

"Now," he said, "supposing you had a force of so many men, with so many guns, here," he jabbed with his finger, "and the enemy were here and here, with so many men and guns, what would you do?"

This was a game I had often played, and I looked eagerly at the map--there and there the enemy; my forces here. It was impossible to do anything except surrender. I looked again.

"Where were my forces before they arrived in that position, in which direction were they travelling, and with what object?"

"Well, suppose they were moving from A to try to get to B here."

Again I studied the map, the position was plain to read; had my reconnaissance been carried out properly--and I should not have advanced without--I could never have been in that position, rather should I have branched off here, and so opened up a splendid line for either advance or retreat. I looked up at the General, he was just winking at another officer who was with us; that settled it, just that wink, I knew then that he was "drawing me again." I smiled grimly.

"General, if ever you allowed your forces to get into such a position you ought to be shot."

For a moment he looked at me, and then burst out laughing.

"*Mon Dieu!* but he is right, this young civilian, but name of a little dog! how did he know? I ought to be shot, I ought to be shot. Ha Ha Ha!" he roared with laughter.

I was appallingly conceited inside, but made little of it outwardly. The General, however, repeated the story so often, that I lost my conceit, and was rather sorry I had been so clever.

Whether it was my enthusiasm, my youth, or the novelty of everything, I don't know, but I enjoyed every minute of my time. Physically I had never been so fit; I took an enormous amount of exercise, walking, riding, boxing with Mr. Neville and others, though chiefly with my companion, who although not my equal in science, and a middle-aged man, yet gave me a lot to do. In each capital, I always went to the greatest masters and studied with the rapier and sabre; I also kept up my shooting.

I think I stopped growing in height about then--just an inch under six feet--but I still continued to expand in width. Illness had mercifully passed me by.

We had been in Paris about three weeks, and were beginning to think of moving on again, somewhere, I for one did not care where, because every place was splendid; I was not the least tired of travel, neither bored nor blasé. It was Mr. Neville who suggested Rudarlia.

We had spent the day at Versailles, a place which I never felt tired of seeing or talking about, and that evening we were idling over our dinner, when my companion said:

"And where to next, Victor?"

"I don't know," I answered with a little start, for he had read my thoughts exactly. "Where do you suggest?"

"There is Rudarlia."

I had thought of this many times, but had always deferred suggesting it. I imagined that it would be perhaps better to leave this visit until after I came of age and received the long-promised information concerning many things; also I wished to view my own country, for the first time, with a practised eye and balanced judgment. I knew from reading and conversation that Rudarlia was not in a flourishing condition, and I did not want to be badly prejudiced by immature impressions. Now, however, Mr. Neville had suggested the visit, which made a great difference.

"That requires thought," I said.

"Naturally; I only proposed it in order to discuss it with you."

"Well, what do you think, knowing how I feel on the subject, would you say my mind was formed enough?"

He looked at me affectionately.

"My boy, the last part of your question I can answer at once in the affirmative. You know, I never pay you compliments, so you can believe me when I say that, in my opinion, your views on most subjects are worth listening to, and your grasp of life is astonishing to me. As to your wishing to defer your visit, the same idea had struck me. Your mother has never even hinted at any wish of hers in the matter, so, to make sure of their views at home, I wired to them. Their answer came to-day, it was this: 'If he feels inclined.'"

"If I only knew," I murmured. "It makes it very difficult, but I suppose, as usual, I must decide. Don't you think that a great deal is left to me?"

"Yes."

"And you agree with that course of procedure?"

"Entirely."

"Yet I should so like to have things taken out of my hands sometimes, it would be ripping to feel, now and again, no sense of being in charge, so to speak, of one's own life; it is rather overpowering to know that everything depends on whether one says yes or no."

"And yet, my boy, there are many in the world, with larger responsibilities than yours are at present; think, for instance, of a great employer of labour who has to decide great things, affecting, perhaps, the welfare of both his employes and his business. Think of anyone in power, saying whether it shall be peace or war."

"But they have assistance in making up their minds."

"Certainly; it is there that we want you to differ from them, we wish you

in all things to be able to decide for yourself; to know how to grasp the pros and cons, to weigh them one against the other, and give a decision."

"But will that be of use to me, should I enter diplomacy?"

"You can only wait and see."

"Not much longer, thank Heaven!"

"Ah!" said Mr. Neville.

We drank our coffee before speaking again, then I said:

"We will go."

"Good! you have decided as I expected you to. We must arrange many things first, however."

"What kind of things?"

"Well, do you intend going as a Rudarlian, or as an Englishman?"

"I have been English everywhere, so far, and for this visit will remain so, unless I change my mind when there."

"Which way do you want to go?"

I thought a little while, and then said:

"I should like to enter the country on foot and walk to the capital; it is a whim, I know, so if you don't feel inclined please say so."

"It is a first-rate plan, I think, and will be most enjoyable. Anyway, Karena is not far distant from the northern frontier."

"It will be hard going, from what I can gather, but it ought to be worth while."

"When shall we start?"

"Oh," I said, looking at my engagement book, "would a week from to-day suit you?"

"Perfectly, it will give us time to work out details."

Once the matter was settled definitely, I began to indulge in a little wild speculation. I was, naturally perhaps, excited at the idea of seeing my own country, hearing my own tongue spoken every day and all day, by my own countrymen and women.

The week fairly flew past. I had written to my mother informing her of our proposed trip, and received an answer back bidding me God-speed, and also advising me on no account to seek to find out anything about my father. It was pointed out to me that I had only a few months to wait and any premature disclosures might do much damage.

This, of course, was so much double Dutch to me, and only added to the mysteriousness of everything. I therefore refused to think about it, but I also resolved to abide by her wish. The letter finished by expressing satisfaction at the

idea that I was to travel as an Englishman.

CHAPTER III

With as little impedimenta as possible, Mr. Neville and I bade au revoir to Paris, little thinking that we had made it our head-quarters for the last time. Since then I have never stayed more than one night in that city, when passing through. I always feel glad that I saw as much of it as I could, for, to my mind, it is eminently a city to induce memories, and I like to look back on the jolly times I have had there.

We went by express to Nerane, the nearest stopping-place to the northern frontier of Rudarlia, and drove in a cart to Melanov, that now famous little town; in those days it was not known at all well. We arrived as night was falling, and it was too dark to see anything of the country which on the morrow we were to enter. The cart deposited our shaken remains at the only inn the place possessed.

I was glad there was only one, for if there had been another, with the same failings, Melanov should have ceased to exist, at least that is what I should have hoped. We had sent our luggage to Karena by train, and had with us just the necessities of life, in our knapsacks. Our visit excited an unreasonable amount of interest, but the innkeeper, a fat, oily Greek, was obsequiousness itself, hovering round with a look of cupidity and craftiness upon his most unprepossessing countenance.

Having removed traces of travel as well as we could, the next thing was food. This was rough and plentiful, with accent on the rough; but, in spite of having recently left Paris, we had managed to acquire healthy appetites and ate good dinners.

Having filled our pipes, we made ourselves as comfortable as the chairs would permit and started talking; but just as we began to warm up to our subject--which I remember dealt with the use of aircraft in war--there was a bang on the door, and in stalked a soldier.

"Good evening," I said.

"Good evening, messieurs. I must apologise for this intrusion, but as Commandant of this frontier, I always make a point of inviting travellers to spend an hour or so with me, in order, if I may speak frankly, to prevent myself becoming too much of a barbarian to associate with gentlemen. I therefore beg of you

to consider my poor quarters as your own, at least the chairs there are in better repair than those you are sitting on."

"You are very kind," I said. "May I introduce Mr. Neville? My own name is Stevens."

"And I am Colonel von Quarovitch. Now, since we know each other's names, will you accompany me to what poor hospitality I can offer?"

We accepted his invitation with more pleasure than he could have any idea of, for more reasons than one. I think, in my case, it was the knowledge I had already gained of those inhabitants of the inn who did not pay taxes, and who seemed to like the taste of me.

The Commandant gave us some most excellent coffee. At first, I believe, he took us for spies, or at least emissaries of some foreign power; but after a while his suspicions seemed to calm down, and soon we were talking and laughing like good friends.

We informed him of our proposed trip, a thing to him undreamed of; but all Englishmen are mad, that is well understood, so he gave an expressive shrug of his shoulders, and offered us any assistance in his power.

He was a fine, rugged-looking man, with great fierce eyebrows and eyes, and I thought to myself that he should be a good soldier. There was, however, an undercurrent of deep resentment in his conversation when speaking of his country's affairs.

Looking upon us as passers-by, he no doubt felt safe in laying bare his grievances. I do not suppose for one moment that he would have done such a thing in the presence of any of his officers, or even civilians of his own race. He was a grumbling old bear, and told us that he had been in his present grade for eighteen years, and for twelve in this place, badly paid.

"His beloved Majesty needs all the money for his prostitutes," he growled. "There is no money for clothing or weapons for his army. Here am I, who have been in every fight for thirty years or more, wounded a score of times, with only a few hundred men to guard a frontier, on starvation pay; seeing men who have never smelt powder made generals, passed over my head simply because they have influence either through their females or through money. And all the thanks I get for my devotion to the monarchy is to be told that there are a hundred applicants for my post if I request anything from head-quarters."

"Then your feelings are not over-kind to your King?" said Mr. Neville.

"King!" he roared. "He is no King of mine, usurper and assassin. I continue to serve in his army, because there is no one who can fill my place here properly, and my country comes before my own feelings still, thank God. And yet," he continued almost wistfully, "I feel assured that, if war was declared to-morrow, some captain with influence would buy my place, and I should be retired, as too

old. Too old, by God! I who know every stick and stone for a hundred miles round, who was created Colonel on the battle-field by his late Majesty, God preserve his soul; I, who have studied war since I could read, who can yet march the stoutest man off his feet."

"But they couldn't retire you, Colonel?" I said inquiringly.

"Could they not, my young friend? Ah, you don't know to what we have fallen; not the people, they are as true and brave as ever, but the courtiers, our rulers, rotten, degraded panders to a gross sensualist's vices; bah! they sicken me. Retire me they would without a thought, and I could take my nobility back to my own dilapidated castle, and feed it on the thousand pounds or so I have saved in thirty years' service."

"Is there not a great deal of discontent in the country?"

"Naturally! where do you find men who would not be discontented and disgusted with underpay and insufficient food? The peasants, too, are ground down with taxes, until they starve. One day some man, driven desperate, will commit the crime of regicide, but perhaps it would not be a crime in this case."

"Would that improve matters?" asked Mr. Neville.

"That I cannot say. The next heir to the throne is a cousin, with little Rudarian in him; from all accounts he resembles the present man in tastes and habits. Ah! if only I had been in Karena twenty years ago, with just the troops I have here, history would have been written differently, and Rudarlia would have been another country, unless Merlin's son had developed badly. As it was, I, with many more Loyalists, had been sent by a hound of a Minister to the other end of the country; when we got back it was all over. The whole of the reigning family, father, mother, and son, had been assassinated; and the present man Ivan was King, he had been waiting near the frontier for the word to come."

"Had they no one to defend them?"

"Those who did were shot without scruple. You know the miscreant fired the royal apartments, burning the bodies of the Queen and the Crown Prince; they were only recognised by the jewellery found on the charred remains."

"What a terrible crime it was!" I said.

Colonel von Quarovitch sprang to his feet.

"Crime!" he cried, shaking his clenched fists above his head. "Crime! God's curse on the authors of it, it has ruined my country."

We stayed only a few minutes after this, finally wishing him good night, and retired.

As we reached the inn, Mr. Neville and I looked at each other.

"Thank God for such men as that," said my companion.

His eyes were misty as he shook my hand, and turned away to his room. I did likewise, but slept little, I was too excited, I imagine; to-morrow I was to enter

Rударlia, my own country.

My thoughts were extremely upsetting, the conversation we had had with Colonel von Quarovitch had made me think a great deal.

Here was an elderly man, devoting his whole life to his country, without hope of recompense.

His was an example of quiet heroism that set my blood on fire. I compared his position with mine, I blushed inwardly at the comparison; of course so far I was not to blame, as I was not yet legally my own master, but in a few months from now I should be; what then would my course be?

Should I remain in England, with everything a man could wish for, or come here to Rударlia, and exert myself to the utmost, in trying to cleanse the country of abuse?

Although I was young, I was not idiotic in my romanticism. I fully realised the futility of starting to wage war on a throne without a great deal of assistance. Could I obtain sufficient following, was I capable of directing the campaign? I would not use force, it would have to be far more subtle; the Press must be won over first, and the natural leaders among the people. Was it possible?

I turned and twisted in my most uncomfortable bed, finding the greatest difficulty in concentrating my thoughts. There were so many conflicting lines of argument to be considered; dreams, and ambitions, rose-tinted, would confuse them.

I dreamed of a Rударlia set high above the neighbouring countries in everything, well governed, possessing a magnificent army, thoroughly trained and equipped, faithfully paid, fed and clothed, returning for it all a loyal devotion--to whom?

There, my thoughts balked--to the present King Ivan? Impossible. His heir, according to Quarovitch, was little better. Who then? God knows the misery I experienced in that *cul-de-sac*; I could see no way out, except in the idea of a republic, and the thought of Rударlia as anything but a kingdom was unthinkable.

The only foreign power to which we could turn in safety for a monarch was England. No German princeling or Austrian Archduke would serve. Russia? As well ask a fox to take care of a chicken. Fool that I was, here was I, a stranger, imagining that I alone could save the country; there must be hundreds of brave men, far more shrewd than I, with influence and wealth, who had no doubt thought and even tried to do the same thing, yet they had failed. That was my opinion when I reached the blank wall in my mind, yet I could not give in, some power seemed to be urging me to try other ways.

Morning came, and found me still puzzling, still without any loophole through which to squeeze to the help of my beloved country.

I say "beloved," for now that I was on the borders, only a few yards into

Rudarlia, I felt surge over me an almost mad exultation, a thrill of passionate feeling, quite foreign to my nature; I felt that that day had marked a change in my life.

Any help that I could give must be a matter of time and the deepest consideration; I would see what Mr. Neville and my parents said--and Mr. Smith too. I had forgotten him, had, I am ashamed to say, forgotten the oldest of my friends, and one who would doubtless be overjoyed to hear that I was in Rudarlia.

He would help me, perhaps, in any way that he thought good.

Well, it would wait with many things until my majority.

While dressing I thought of my stepfather; what would he think, as an American, would he advise a republic?

And then his advice flashed across me: "Spend money when you think good will come of it."

I had never followed his advice to any large extent, a hundred pounds or so at a time.

"I wonder," I said aloud, "whether this is an opportunity?"

It was a fresh idea, and I dawdled over my toilet, so as to have more time for consideration.

Could I in any way help Quarovitch and his men: would he accept financial assistance, not for himself but for the troops he commanded?

I must see him, I decided that there and then. It might be that I should have to divulge my nationality to him, what did it matter? He was an honest and honourable man, on that I would have wagered anything. So now, I could finish my dressing, and go down to my breakfast.

Mr. Neville was already in the room waiting for me; he looked at me intently as I entered.

"Sleep well?" he asked.

"No, very badly, the conversation of last night upset me, I think."

"H'm. Well, do you know it did me too, but for different reasons, no doubt. Let us have breakfast, and talk." He seated himself and began. "We had better stick to English, it's safer," he remarked. "One never knows who can overhear. First of all, I propose to tell you why you did not sleep, then, why I was likewise kept awake; if I am wrong tell me. You," he began decapitating an egg, "were engaged in thinking how you, as a Rudarlian, could help your country. You made and unmade many plans, each one, however, was to your mind impracticable; am I right?"

"Quite right," I said.

"It was this knowledge of your thoughts that kept me awake," continued my companion. "I felt convinced that you would have glorious dreams, which would break like glass before reason. I knew that you would finally decide to abandon

any active policy at present, meaning to return to it in the near future. Now I know something of these things; and the anxiety for your future kept me from slumberland."

"How on earth did you know what I was thinking, are you capable of thought reading, even when the thinker is absent?"

He laughed.

"I wish I were. No, it is only the result of logic, first, and the knowledge I have of you, secondly. When you put a young man like yourself before the picture displaying the ruin of his country, it is natural for him to feel obsessed by the desire to reconstruct the crumbled edifice. I fancy I could also guess the chief obstacle in your various lines of argument."

"I should not be surprised," I said, laughing.

"Was it not the choice of a ruler?"

"Yes."

"Well, I don't wonder that you were brought to a halt, it has puzzled me, too, a great deal; but we can discuss that on our journey. You have quite decided to go over the mountains?"

"Oh yes, if you are agreeable; it will be much more interesting and exciting."

"Very well, but we shall want a guide."

"The innkeeper will know of one, I'm sure."

"I'll ask him."

Our sleek host, looking more evil by daylight than I had anticipated, knew just the man for us, the perfect guide: a mountaineer, strong, honest, and intelligent, he would send for him at once.

"I wonder," I said, "whether our host is an authority on honesty."

Mr. Neville laughed.

"The same thought struck me; but, as we are armed, I don't think there is anything to fear."

"Well, he won't be here for some time yet; and I want to ask your opinion on a serious matter."

"Fire ahead, Victor."

I then proceeded to lay bare my plan with regard to Quarovitch; Mr. Neville listened in silence.

"It is rather an extraordinary proposal," he said.

I remember that we were both silent for a considerable time after that and then he said suddenly:

"I agree with you about Quarovitch; he is, I should say, a most honourable man, but would he accept the trust? You would have to tell him that you were a Rudarlian, even then it remains to be seen whether he will consent to receive, from a civilian, the money that should come from his government. I cannot say,

although personally, in his place I should."

"Then," I cried joyfully, "you think I can do it, you advise it?"

"I leave it to you, partner," said Mr. Neville, smiling.

"Oh, bother bridge, I feel that I shall never play again with any pleasure; can't you ever declare?"

"Not on this hand. I should say, however, that you might make it no trumps; you have the three aces--health, wealth, and enthusiasm."

"But the kings are against us, with perhaps the fourth ace."

"And that is?" asked my companion.

"Luck," said I, "but I'll risk it."

"How much do you propose offering him?"

"Five thousand; that should last until I come again."

"Always look ahead," said Mr. Neville, but he would say nothing more about the sum I had named.

A few moments after this, the host returned; with him was a man, a splendid looking fellow, with the free bearing and controlled muscles of a mountaineer.

I spoke to him in Rudarlian, telling him that we wished for a guide over the mountains; did he know of a way other than the main road? Yes, he did.

Was it possible to work down by that route into the plains? Yes, it was. Would he be content with so much? Yes, he would. What would be necessary for the trip? He informed us that we must take food and drink; if we had luggage, a pony to carry it. That was all as far as he could suggest.

"What do you think, Mr. Neville?" I asked in English.

"H'm. He looks like a brigand, but then they mostly do to English eyes; I think I should engage him."

I did. He would, he assured us, see about a pony, and all the necessary things we needed, if we cared; also we must provide ourselves with rugs, for the night.

"Indeed," said I, "why did you not mention that before?"

"I did not know that your Excellencies proposed starting at midday."

This had only been mentioned just before, so that the answer seemed good; but I could not help feeling a slight anxiety, as the host was so extremely unprepossessing. I almost wished that we had asked Quarovitch.

I gave Piotr, as the man was called, the necessary instructions, bidding him wait for us with his purchases at the inn; then we walked along to the low, white-washed building, used as the barracks.

From Melanov, little could be seen of Rudarlia, though the place was high up, as the main road twisted round the side of an eminence, blocking the view. There was nothing therefore to look at, as the one street was empty save for a stray dog or so.

My thoughts were in a turmoil, as we strolled along. How was I to broach

the subject to the Colonel? Perhaps he would give me an opening.

He was seated at a table by the only window in the room; as we entered, a subaltern saluted and passed out.

"Ah, messieurs, I am glad indeed to see you," said the Colonel, rising from his chair, and warmly shaking our hands. "I hope my outburst last evening did not alarm you, you must forgive an old man, who finds it difficult to keep his temper sometimes."

"You did not alarm us at all, it was most justifiable."

"In fact," chimed in Mr. Neville, "so much so that it induced my friend here to come to you this morning, to ask for a half-hour or so of your time."

"Delighted, delighted; but I do not see the connection between the two."

"Then," said I, feeling desperately uneasy, "I must explain, if you will give me permission."

"Please take a chair, and make yourselves as comfortable as these quarters permit."

He pulled his own chair round as we seated ourselves, and held out a box of cigarettes to us.

"I cannot offer you cigars like the ones I smoked last night," he said apologetically.

"Now," he continued when we had lighted them, "an hour, or two hours, as you will."

"I don't think it will take long, at least I hope not. You will remember saying last night that the present government in Rudarlia left the army in an almost necessitous state, almost without clothing and food?"

"That is so," said Quarovitch, with a perplexed look.

"It struck me," I said, after a moment's hesitation, "that a man like yourself, with a certain sum of money, might do a great deal to alleviate such conditions among the men under your command."

"So he might, but I thought I made it sufficiently plain that I was without private means."

"You did; therefore, I have come to offer them to you, or rather to ask you to accept for your troops a sum of money from me."

He looked from me to Mr. Neville, with an inquiring lift of his eyebrows.

"No," I said, smiling, "I am not mad, but I am intensely interested in everything Rudarlian; and, if you could see your way to be banker for your troops, you would place me enormously in your debt."

"It is impossible, of course," he said quietly. "Rudarlia is in a bad way, I admit, but her army cannot be paid by an Englishman or any other foreigner. I thank you for your offer, but it is impossible."

He rose from his seat as though to terminate our conversation. He was

angered, hurt too, by what he no doubt looked upon as an unwarrantable intrusion on my part; I felt that he looked upon me as one who had taken advantage of his outburst of the previous evening.

"One moment, Colonel, before you decide," I said. "You feel, no doubt, that my offer is almost, if not quite an impertinence; believe me, I anticipated that view, I have therefore to confess to misinforming you. I am not an Englishman; although brought up there, I, like yourself, am a Rudarlian. This is my first visit to my country since my babyhood; now you see why your words yesterday had so much effect upon me."

He looked at me a trifle suspiciously.

"Stevens is not a Rudarlian name," he said.

"No," broke in Mr. Neville, "but Stefan is, I believe."

"So! you have astonished me, monsieur. You were taken away as a baby, you say?"

"I think so, I am not quite sure."

"If you will pardon my interrupting, Colonel," said my companion, "but Monsieur Stefan knows little of his birth or childhood. There are reasons, grave reasons, why he should remain in ignorance until his majority in a few months' time. I, however, give you my word that he is a Rudarlian by birth."

"I did not doubt it, monsieur. I was staggered for the moment at the idea of anyone making such a proposal; even now, that I know him to be my countryman, I do not see my way to accept his offer."

"May I ask why?" I said despondently. "I had hoped so much to do something for our army."

"Think, Monsieur Stefan, how could it be explained that I, a penniless man, had accepted money to pay my troops? They would say immediately that my nest was feathered too, and what reason do you suppose would be accredited to the gift? Why, to buy their loyalty."

"Who for?" I asked quickly.

Colonel von Quarovitch looked puzzled.

"H'm! That is rather difficult to answer; they would say, most likely, that you were the emissary of Russia, Austria, or Bornia; most probably the latter, since they are our neighbours."

His argument was certainly sound; and I searched my brains for a solution.

"Don't you ever speculate, Colonel?" I asked.

"Eh?"

"I thought you had invested a certain sum, a little while ago, in some rubber company."

"Eh?" he said again.

Mr. Neville chuckled.

I continued:

"So at least I understood; five hundred pounds, I think it was, they rose ten points or so, giving you the handsome profit of five thousand pounds."

He still looked at me inquiringly; but suddenly he smiled grimly, and stared for a few minutes out of the window. Then, slowly, he drew a piece of paper and a pen towards him, and looked up.

"What did you say the name of the rubber company was, monsieur?"

I had won. In a boyish impulse I seized his hand and shook it violently.

"Hurrah! I was so afraid that you would continue in your refusal."

He laughed outright.

"I have never known anyone so anxious to part with money before, and, monsieur, I was desperately anxious that you should think of a way out; it means so much to my men. As it is, I shall become almost too popular, thanks to you."

For the next hour we discussed ways and means. I was to write home, and inform my stepfather of what I had done; and he was to send a letter with a draft to Quarovitch, purporting to come from a banker. The spending of the money, I would have nothing to say about, and told him so.

"You know what the men require, I don't, I leave it therefore entirely to you. Do as you think best; and mind you keep up your investments, for when I come again, in a little while, God willing, you must have had another lucky stroke of business."

"I will keep an account of every penny, to await your return."

"Which will be waste of labour, Colonel, for I shall put it in the fire unread; you have quite enough to do, to spend the money, without clerking."

His stern old face twitched, and he said huskily:

"God bless you, until your return, Monsieur Stefan."

Our interview had lasted longer than we had expected; and we had to hurry, to get back to the inn at the time appointed.

We found our guide to be, waiting, with a small shaggy horse, laden with our properties; he saluted as we hurried up.

"I have everything your Excellencies require," he said.

He would have proceeded to tell us how clever he had been in his bargaining, but we cut him short; and I went into the inn to settle our account. I sent a boy to find the host and then entered the dining-room to wait for him. I walked to the window and looked out, deep in thought.

"A deliberate cut," said a voice behind me.

I swung round.

"Carruthers? Well, I'm damned!"

"Judging by this inn, I should say you were; but how goes it, old chap?"

"How in the world did you get here?"

"Boat, train, and horse; but I'm waiting for you to say that you are pleased to see me."

"Pleased? You bet I am; why, there is nothing could have pleased me more; but how did you know where to find us?"

"Your mother gave me your probable route, so I chanced it. I have three months' leave, and I'm going to enjoy my little self."

"Good! Now, look here, we are just going to start on a tramp to the capital: are you game to come now, or shall we postpone it?"

"I'll come right away. I've only a bag, and I'll leave that here to be forwarded."

"It can go on our transport animal--they call it a horse--fetch it while I settle up; Mr. Neville is outside."

It was the final touch to my happiness to have Carruthers with us; Mr. Neville, too, was delighted. There was such a tremendous lot to tell each other: all the multitude of happenings of the last two years.

The path along which we were travelling was only a bridle track at most and led us by a zigzag route up the mountain. We had too much to do, in seeing that we put our feet on firm ground, to talk, and as there was little beside rock to look at we did not make any great delay. It was hard work, though; how the horse managed some parts beats me altogether. Our guide Piotr kept ahead at a steady pace. Just as it was getting dusk, he stopped.

"This will be a good place to halt, Excellency."

"Very good."

I walked a little farther and turned a corner, Rudarlia lay in front of me. I was glad that my companions had stayed behind, for my heart was beating ridiculously, and there was a mist in front of my eyes. I stood there alone, and drank in the beauty of the vast panorama stretched before me, the failing light made for mystery, and full of exultation I stretched out my arms as though to embrace it all, murmuring to myself:

"My country! my country!"

CHAPTER IV

When I returned to the others, I found a wood fire crackling merrily, and preparations being made for a meal.

I am afraid that I did not contribute much to the conversation for some time--

-I was thinking; but after we had finished eating, and were sitting smoking with the comfortable feeling one has when healthily tired, I did my share.

Carruthers gave me a message from my people: on no consideration was I to try and find Mr. Smith, as any inquiries might be serious for him. Of course he had not been given any reasons for this; but I could see he was curious, and I could not, and Mr. Neville would not, enlighten him.

It was a perfect night, and there was no sound, save the rippling of a brook, to mar the stillness, that is, when we were not talking. Little by little I saw Mr. Neville and Carruthers growing more and more drowsy, and presently, with contented grunts, they rolled over and fell asleep. Piotr had already taken himself away from the fire and now lay, a dark mass, wrapped in his blanket.

We had asked many questions of him, but I do not remember receiving any enlightening answers; he always appeared to be guarding his tongue, why, I did not understand.

There was one thing which Carruthers had told me that gave me considerable uneasiness; it was that my stepfather did not seem as well as his wont. This upset me, for I had never known him anything but splendidly well. I seemed to feel him near me in the night; perhaps at that moment he was talking of us, who knows? The darkness made me strangely fanciful, but presently I too was asleep.

The next morning I woke very early, and found that we had an addition to our party, a man, hump-backed, and rather evil looking.

Piotr explained that he had overtaken us at about midnight, and, as he was tired, had asked permission to use our fire.

I spoke a few words to the fellow, telling him that he could have some food if he liked, and then woke the others.

Our ablutions were performed in a small stream that gurgled and spluttered a few yards away; then, having had our breakfast, we once more started.

This time our order was reversed, the two men and the horse being behind; while we three tramped cheerfully on, glorying in the fresh morning air which had the effect of champagne upon our spirits.

Two or three miles from our halting place of the night, we came to a piece of road only some seven or eight feet wide.

On one side the ground sloped steeply up, covered with great masses of rock and stones; on the other was a sheer drop of some hundreds of feet into a thickly wooded valley.

Carruthers suddenly took it into his head that he was a mountain goat, and went springing madly down the path, disappearing in a few moments round a curve.

Mr. Neville had just made some laughing remark about his being almost inclined to follow, when without any reason apparently, a stone came rushing

down from above us.

We both sprang forward instinctively, and heard the rock strike the path, then an appalling yell from behind us; we swung round. Piotr had disappeared. The hunchback was cringing away from the abyss, and could hardly summon sufficient strength to point with a trembling hand. It was enough, however, and we understood that our guide had gone over the edge; the suddenness of the accident made it the more appalling.

We lay flat on our stomachs and peered over; then I scrambled to my feet.

"He's stuck there, some way down. Here you, run after the gentleman and get him back as quickly as possible; there is just a chance that we can save your friend. Quick, man, quick!"

He darted off; and Mr. Neville ran to undo the rope which hung from the pack-saddle of the horse.

"Will it be long enough?" I said.

"I hope so, I judge him to be thirty to thirty-five feet down."

I took the free end of the rope, and made a slip noose. The one idea in my head was that somehow I must save this man. He was as far as I could see jammed in an angle of rock, and held in position by the roots of a small tree, which had found enough earth on the ledge to give it a stunted existence.

I kept repeating to myself: "If only the tree holds, if only the tree holds." When the rope had been arranged satisfactorily I placed a folded rug on the edge of the precipice, to prevent the rock cutting, then turned to see if Carruthers was in sight.

Mr. Neville was standing over me, with a terribly drawn look on his face.

"Victor, you can't go," he muttered.

I said nothing, only smiled; and Carruthers turned the corner at a run, followed closely by the hunchback.

"Buck up, old man," he cried, throwing off his coat, "and I'll get him up in a jiffy."

"No, I'm going."

They looked at me, Mr. Neville very white, and Carruthers almost angrily.

"Don't talk rot, Splosh, of course I shall go."

"You will do nothing of the kind; he is my servant, my countryman, and I'm going. Quick, don't waste time talking, lay on to the rope, you and Mr. Neville, while you," I said to the hunchback, "be ready to pull him over the edge."

I slipped my right foot into the noose.

"Now hold on, I'm going, I'll yell when you are to pull him up; let me down slowly."

I did not look at them again, until I had lowered myself over the edge, and then it was but a fleeting glance, just long enough to smile to them, and notice

their set mouths.

They lowered away slowly, almost too slowly for me, as it was a most unpleasant rock to look at, and I did not care to glance down more than was absolutely necessary. It was also an unpleasant feeling to swing in the air, with just a thin rope between you and eternity; however, little by little I went down, keeping myself away from the cliff with my left hand, and untied foot.

When I judged that the ledge must be near, I looked down. I was about six feet from it; two minutes, and I was level. I yelled, and at once my descent was arrested.

The ledge was infernally narrow, and at first I did not see how to manage. By cautiously edging along, however, I was enabled to stand astride of Piotr's body, although one foot had perforce to rest upon the tree, which caused creaking sounds of a most discomfiting nature. I removed my foot from the noose.

Piotr's legs hung down, dangling over space, I could see that one was broken; he was moaning faintly, and trying to move his arm. It was an extremely difficult business, getting the rope underneath him, but with patience and a great deal of care it was done; and I drew it tight under his arm-pits. It seemed then that nothing remained but to give them the signal to hoist; but just as I was going to yell the thought flashed across me that, if he struggled and threw up his arms, the rope might slip, then it would be all up for both of us, for it was certain that, in falling, he would drag or knock me off the perch as well.

This required thought, as Mr. Neville so often reminded me; and I wondered what could be done to fasten his arms down.

Beneath his embroidered waistcoat he was wearing the scarf or sash of the mountaineer. Down again I bent, and started to get it loose; an ugly looking knife was still tucked into it, this, as I pulled, fell out, and went glistening down into the trees beneath. I remember thinking it was lucky there was nobody there for it to fall on, and I believe I grinned; but an extra crack from the tree made me serious again.

By dint of pulling, I got the sash unwound; and with it fastened his arms as I desired, above the elbow, securely to his sides. He was safe now, but how was I to keep clear of his body as he rose? I looked up, Carruther's face was peering down at me.

"Are you all right, Splosh?"

"Yes, I'm all right. Wait half a minute, and then you can begin to haul."

I heard what seemed like a number of voices talking, but avoided looking up again; instead, I did the only thing which seemed to me possible; I yelled, and felt the rope tighten, saw Piotr gradually assume a sitting posture. Then, while I still had the rope to assist me, I slipped over, and hung by my hands to the edge. It was only for a little time, for as soon as I saw our guide's body swing clear I

pulled myself up again; it was lucky I had gone in for gymnastics. I sat on the ledge sideways; it was the only way to sit, and beastly uncomfortable. By using the greatest caution, I was enabled to pull a small flask, which I always carried, from my pocket; a drink from this did me good as I had been feeling rather dizzy.

"Hullo! hullo! Splosh!"

I looked up again, there was a row of heads where only Carruthers' had been before.

"Hullo!" I called back. "Is the rope ready?"

"It is coming down now, old chap; be careful."

The heads were still there, swarthy, wild looking faces peered down at me. I grinned, and shouted "Good day" in Rudarlian, and they laughed as they answered me. Cheerful chaps, but where the devil had they come from?

The ascent was infinitely nicer than the descent, the face of the cliff appeared almost rosy and kind. I felt as brave as possible now, whereas before I had had my heart in my boots. Strong hands seized me on the edge; and in a moment I was up on the pathway again, with my companions each shaking a hand, as though we had been parted for years.

I certainly was astonished to see the men who surrounded us; the best that could be said of them was that they were all smiling, but each man was a walking arsenal. They were not the sort of men I should have chosen as companions for a pleasant Sunday afternoon.

"Friends of yours?" I said to Mr. Neville, and Carruthers roared.

"Not yet, but certainly I trust they will be; they came from goodness knows where. By appearances they are brigands--not that I wish to judge them harshly."

"Yes, by appearances they are, but how is Piotr?"

"I will look at him, if you will tell these fellows to get out of the way."

I told the men that we would attend to Piotr, but that they must give us room, and fetch wood for a litter. They obeyed like lambs. Three went to seek young trees for the purpose I had named, the others stood round in silence, save one, who came forward and offered his services; he was, I understood, the bone-setter of the gang. Mr. Neville accepted his offer and set to work. After an examination lasting some little time, he said:

"It is marvellous, he has only broken a leg, and has a slight concussion; bruised as well, of course, but not another bone broken."

"What luck! Can you set his leg between you?"

"I hope so, and before he regains his senses."

By the time the men had returned with the trees, it was done: the broken limb had been set, and carefully bandaged in splints. A litter was formed with the trees and sashes of some of the men and rugs thrown over that. Upon this clever piece of work the injured man was placed carefully, and a little brandy forced

down his throat.

Then evidently a difficulty arose. The fellows began to converse among themselves with many glances at us, shrugging of shoulders, and expressive gestures of the hands.

There was one who was apparently the leader, and upon his face was an expression of the utmost perplexity. He kept staring first at the litter then at me, then at my companions and then at the litter. It dawned upon me that their camp might be near, but that they were anxious to avoid showing us the way; on the other hand, they could not capture us as they had evidently intended, since we had befriended their chief. I appreciated their dilemma and laughed, beckoned to the fellow, and together we walked a few paces away from the others.

"You are troubled," I said. "Now which is it to be, are you going to take us with you as enemies, or shall we part in a friendly way? For, of course, my friends and I fully realise that the chief of a party such as yours does not take the position of guide, unless he has some good reason for it."

He saw that I was smiling, so he too grinned.

"Excellency, for your age you are as clear-sighted as an eagle."

"I assure you, my friend, I felt like one a few minutes ago; but tell me, was I right in my surmise about your state of mind?"

"Your Excellency was right. We could never, however, part as enemies; and if we let you go before our chief regains his senses----" he shrugged his shoulders in a most expressive way.

"H'm! but we cannot remain here, can we? And you evidently would not care to take us with you as friends; of course, to these gentlemen and myself, the word friend means that we should never betray anything we might happen to learn. I might suggest, too, that men blindfolded would see nothing if led to some place carefully."

A gleam of satisfaction lit up his face.

"And would your Excellencies submit to that? It would be only for a few minutes."

"Oh yes, and I can answer for my friends."

I was desirous of following up this little adventure, for these men were no doubt almost driven to brigandage; and, if their demands could be satisfied, they might become useful allies and good citizens. I was already planning for the future.

We walked back to the others, and I informed them of what had been arranged. Carruthers treated it as a huge joke. He knew but a few words of Rudarian, and proceeded to use them vigorously as we followed the litter.

We continued our course down the path, which after a little swerved into less close proximity to the valley below. Although still high up in the mountain,

we were beginning to be able to distinguish the natural features of the panoramic landscape more clearly.

What struck us most was the absence of human habitations, for the valley looked as though it would be fertile, being well watered.

I questioned the man whom I was walking beside.

"Ah, your Excellency, it is strange to you, but has a different significance to us; we to whom that land yielded a livelihood have been driven to other ways of making one. Our harvests--good or bad, as the good God decided--were taken from us in payment of taxes, which were so great that even the whole year's profit would not pay them. So--what would you? I, myself, worked ten years on the land my father and grandfather had owned. But every year the burden grew greater; and, as on the last occasion I could not pay the collector, he drove off my animals, such as they were, and would have taken me to prison only I stuck my knife into him and fled."

He told me this quite calmly. He had most probably killed the collector, but it evidently struck him as a justifiable deed, and in my heart of hearts I could not altogether blame him. It gave me an inkling of what the treatment of peasants was like, under the rule of this man who starved his soldiers and squandered their pay on courtesans.

A little farther on, we were informed that the time had come for them to blindfold us; and there being no opposition they proceeded to do so. With our eyes covered we were led forward again for a while, and then the climb began. Our hands were placed in niches, or our feet guided to some rock or projection, as, without mishap or inconvenience, we clambered up and up, until once more our feet were on a pathway. Another longish walk, a sharp turn, and then we were halted, and the bandages which prevented our seeing taken away.

I stood absolutely amazed, blinking my eyes to find out whether I was really awake or dreaming, for we were in a place that no one could ever have dreamed existed. It was like an enormous cup scooped out of the mountain, and its sides must have been a couple of hundred feet high. The diameter of the cup seemed over a mile; a more perfect hiding-place it would have been impossible to conceive. There was one part covered with fine trees, another splendid pasture, upon which were numerous cattle and sheep, while a small stream wandered across the whole length of the place, providing a good water supply. On our right stood some fifteen wooden houses, substantially built, with patches of vegetable gardens in front of each.

This much I took in with my first bewildered glance.

"Well, I'm damned!" said Carruthers.

"So am I!" said I.

"In fact we all are!" said Mr. Neville sagely.

The litter had by now been carried down through the narrow fissure through which we had entered, and a host of people came running from the houses and fields; people of all ages and both sexes. They surrounded us with looks far from amiable, until the nominal leader explained our presence to their satisfaction, and incidentally to ours. I had a busy time, for I believe they would all have embraced me. One did, but as she turned out to be the betrothed wife of Piotr, she was forgiven; she was a dashed fine looking girl too, so very attractive that Carruthers grumbled, and murmured that he had wanted to save Piotr himself.

For some days they feasted and made much of us; nor was it dull, for Carruthers, as usual, had to try to teach the male portion of the community how to play games. This was a source of continual delight to him; and, as Mr. Neville was chiefly engaged in looking after Piotr, I amused myself by enticing all and sundry into conversation. I say "amused," but it really was not amusement to listen to some of the tales of brutality of the tax gatherers with which these people had put up, before breaking away to the free life they then led.

Upon the day before the one upon which we had decided to leave, Carruthers got up what he was pleased to call "Athletic Sports." It was a great success, and some very fine performances took place; it was astonishing, too, how these men took to the idea, and allowed themselves to be bullied by Carruthers and myself, who acted as "Officials." The event which was afterwards voted the greatest success was the obstacle race for women; in this Carruthers had surpassed himself in the ingenuity of the obstacles. Every one, both performers and onlookers, was simply helpless with laughter before the end of the race, which was won by a fine old woman of over sixty.

Mr. Neville was attending Piotr, who sat propped up at one of the windows.

Piotr's reception of me was rather funny. He was so deadly ashamed of his motive in coming to us as guide, especially so, when I chaffed him about the path he had expected us to follow, by air. However, I understood that in him I had a friend, who would sacrifice his life for me should occasion arise.

We had numerous conversations about Rudarlia, and I found that he was a man of ideals, as well as being professionally a brigand; what is more, I believed him when he told me that he had only taken to it when there was no other way open.

Mr. Neville had asked him whether he would give up his present career, if the laws were readjusted.

"Give us fair taxation, and justice, and we will serve God and the King until the end," had been his response.

"Ivan?" I asked.

"I said a 'King,'" was the stern reply. "One who puts his country before such things as his mistresses; Ivan is no king, he is a vile, grasping tyrant."

"Are there many who think as you do?"

"I never knew or heard of a man who wouldn't rejoice at news of his death." Decidedly the King was not beloved.

We started early the next morning, and were almost sorry to go. We had learned to like these simple-hearted, fierce people; and they seemed to reciprocate the feeling.

Piotr broke a coin in two, and presented me with one-half.

"If you are in Rudarlia, and need me, send me that piece; if I am alive I will come to you."

I put it carefully away, thanking him for the promise. As a parting gift, I made him accept my revolver. His eyes glistened at the sight of it; but he swore that it should only be used in self-defence, and I knew that he would keep his word.

Our eyes were left unbandaged as we made our way out of the place: we had given our word not to divulge the secret.

The second in command acted as our guide, and before long we were out of the mountains, and proceeding along the small, winding paths by which we made our way to the main road from Melanov to Karena. Once we were upon that we made better progress; and soon came to a small village called Viritz, where we halted, for it was at this place that our guide was to turn back.

We made many purchases there, however, and fairly loaded up the horse; the things we bought were to be divided among the men and women we had just left. With many assurances of goodwill on both sides we parted, our guide setting his face towards the mountains while we turned into the inn for a meal.

It was only after a good deal of trouble that we secured a cart to take us and our small belongings towards Karena; but once the difficulty was overcome we started gaily forward again. As usual, we entered into a discussion of military affairs, and it struck us all that, from Melanov, there would be no great obstacle in forcing a way through to the capital, unless the fortifications of that city were very strong. That, of course, we did not know; nor did the driver of our cart, a surly brute, who had neither civility nor good looks to recommend him.

We dismissed the cart at Yuhban, a somewhat larger village, where we had determined to spend the night, under the vain illusion that we should sleep.

Alas, from the moment that we entered that wretched building we suffered! And so it was until we left in the early morning, after paying a bill which would not have disgraced the *Ritz* in London.

I made a mental note to the effect that when I returned to Rudarlia as a saviour, in which rôle I had cast myself, the first, or one of the first improvements I should inaugurate, would be the burning down of all such inns, from one end of the country to the other. I believe that my companions would have wanted to

burn the innkeepers as well.

From this village of fleas and worse, we escaped by a small motor-bus which connected it with Karena, and allowed the driver to recommend the *Carlton* as the best, and most up-to-date of the Karenian hotels. We were agreeably surprised to find that he had not misled us; it was quite a credit to Rudarlia, with every convenience and comfort that could be desired, as well as excellent cooking. I will confess that I do enjoy a good dinner.

We engaged a suite on the first floor; and from that time were looked upon with favour by the staff, in spite of our scanty baggage.

We spent two or three days in going round, sightseeing; but we soon settled down to study the conditions under which the people lived. Daily we took long walks or drives into the country, and nightly we sat in cafés, entering into conversation with anyone and every one, always, however, finding the same fierce resentment against the King and his Court. There was a current of unrest among them all, dull mutterings which betokened an approaching storm; and it seemed to me that only a leader was needed to raise the whole country, but always that cursed *cul-de-sac*: who to put in Ivan's place? We had a glimpse of him one day, as we were returning to our hotel: a fat, bibulous-looking man, with great coarse lips, and crafty eyes.

Not a voice was raised as he drove through the great gates of his palace, although there were many people present. His escort, who were the only smart soldiers we had seen, looked as though disgusted with their work of guarding him. Soon afterwards came another carriage in which a woman was sitting, both young and beautiful.

I asked a gentleman who was near me who she was.

"I do not know, I have never seen that one before; if she's new, it will mean fresh taxation, I suppose."

"Why? I am afraid I don't quite understand; who is she?"

"Some French girl most probably; whenever a new one appears, the taxes go up; some one must pay for the jewels for the King's mistress."

"Good God! can it really be so?" I asked, feigning surprise, for I was desirous of obtaining more information.

"The good God has deserted Rudarlia, monsieur, only the devil reigns here now. But you are a stranger evidently, or you would not be surprised. We Rudarlans have experienced it before, but----" he looked at me quickly for a moment, lifted his hat and passed on.

"Is your blood on the boil?" asked Mr. Neville, smiling.

I did not answer, it was coming home to me so strongly that something must be done; there would be bloodshed, insurrection, and red revolution before long, if the present state of things continued. From the ashes, what would arise?

No state can stand an upheaval such as I pictured, without for many years feeling the effect of it, more especially a race like the Rudarlians, who are conservative by nature.

What I could not understand was, how the nobles allowed it. Surely there must be among them fine, strong men, capable of grasping the reins and stopping the headlong rush to destruction; and then crept in the word, jealousy.

Jealousy, that accursed thing, which has wrecked so many ideas, and brought misery to so many individuals. That would account for it. Hating the present monarch, hating equally the heir, they would none of them combine to alter matters, for fear that one of them should be exalted over the others.

Since then I have discovered that I misjudged them.

CHAPTER V

We had been in Karena for two weeks, and what puzzled me most was that we had neither seen nor heard of Mr. Smith, for I felt sure my people would have let him know that we were in the city. It seemed so strange that one of my oldest friends should take no notice. I knew of course that "Smith" was an assumed name, but I had no idea of his real one, so even had I wished to ignore my parents' wishes, and make inquiries, I should have been at a loss how to do so.

It was this kind of thing which galled me, more especially now, when I wished to include him in my dreams, when working out schemes for Rudarlia's welfare. I never mentioned him to Mr. Neville, as I thought it would be placing him in an awkward position, he who knew.

If I had but known it, circumstances, even then, were drawing us together; the wheels of chance were turning slowly, and we were destined to meet in a manner which opened my eyes to the extraordinary laws of coincidence.

Carruthers and I had been out one evening on one of our nocturnal wanderings in search of information, and were returning to our hotel, when my companion suggested a stroll to the top of the road overlooking Yuhban.

I acquiesced, as this suggestion suited me perfectly. I was glad of an excuse to breathe a little fresh air, after the hot and rather smelly café, in which we had spent the best part of the evening.

The route by which we were going would only take us about half a mile out of our way. We did not speak much. Carruthers, for him, was taciturn, and I, as

usual, was trying to find a suitable successor to King Ivan.

It was a perfect night with a fine moon, so, having reached the place we wanted, we stood for a few moments looking over the valley below. It was a night for an artist or a poet, and little did we think, as we stood there in peaceful silence, that a few minutes would bring horrid strife.

A motor was approaching from Yuhban. We could see her headlights as she twisted and turned with the winding road; a big silent car, and a magnificent hill-climber too, for she came up the steep bit at the top without changing gear. When only about ten yards from where we were standing, she stopped suddenly. We saw the chauffeur jump out, while at the same time three men ran from the shadow of a wall, where they had been hidden; they came up behind the car. Just as the chauffeur had succeeded in opening one door, a man descended on the other side of the car.

He gave one quick glance round, and started running at top speed towards us; and I saw the moonlight flash on a weapon he carried in his hand. Hard after him came the three men and the chauffeur.

"Come on, Splosh!" cried Carruthers.

We sprang forward. I saw him send one man flying and jump at another, but at that moment the pursued man stumbled, and his weapon flew out of his hand, right at my feet.

I stooped and picked it up; it was a sword-stick. The next moment, I found myself parrying fierce and rapid sword-thrusts, almost without knowledge. My astonishment gradually left me and I grew cool; it was well I did, for I needed all my wits about me, my opponent being a consummate swordsman. At first it was as much as I could do to keep clear of his point; but, as I grew more collected, the better I fenced. I had no idea what was happening to the others, but I had seen one knocked out by Carruthers, and hoped that he and the pursued could account for the other two. I recollected that my chum had his revolver with him, and called out to remind him of the fact; he answered something, and then a shot rang out just behind me. It startled me for the moment, in spite of my being half-prepared for it, and my adversary managed to touch my arm with his point, a mere prick. And then I lost all knowledge except of the man I was fighting; only once did I remember that there were others by me, and that was when Carruthers said:

"You, Mr----?"

After that there was silence again, only broken by the sound of our feet and the grating of our sword-blades, as my opponent and I sprang backwards and forwards.

I had tried various attacks, and also foiled them; now I would try a special favourite of my stepfather's. It was risky, I knew, as it left rather an opening for a thrust through the arm; but I had to do something, as this prolonged bout was

beginning to make itself felt.

Thank God, it had succeeded, and I heaved a sigh of relief, as my blade passed through my adversary's shoulder. He gave a gasp and fell.

I must say that the complete and sudden success of my attack staggered me for a moment, so much so that I remained staring at the prostrate man; then I turned--and stood with my mouth open, for there was Mr. Smith with both arms outstretched.

"You--was it you then?"

"Yes, I, Victor, alive, thanks to you two; but come quickly, I will explain as soon as we are out of this. We will send help for these murderers, we can do nothing ourselves."

"But I should like to do something for him," I said, pointing to my opponent's body.

"Leave it to me, my boy, I will see that he is taken care of. Quick! quick! or we shall be in trouble."

Together we ran to the car, passing three bodies, one shot, one stunned, and one bound.

"Jump in, I will drive," said Mr. Smith.

He did drive, and the pace we went would have scared anyone; but he had wonderful command over the car, and we had no accident. Somewhere on the other side of the town he pulled up, outside a fine mansion standing in a small park. As we stopped, the door of the house opened, and a man hastened down the steps.

"Thank God, Count! We were afraid something had happened to you."

"So it did, Baron."

"Where's Peter?"

"In heaven, I hope; in hell, I am afraid."

"As bad as that, was it?"

"Worse: Goltz was in it."

"Goltz!" He gave a little whistle. "Come in at once; but who are these?" He indicated us with a wave of his hand.

"Ah," said Mr. Smith, "who are they? Let me present to you Messieurs Stevens and Carruthers; Baron von Sluben. Now let us go in for one minute. By the way, Baron, will you 'phone to Ducrot, to look after some bodies near his house? He will be pleased to find Goltz among them--oh no, not dead. Tell him to treat them with the greatest kindness and attention, as a mark of his affection to the man they did not kill."

We moved into the house, Baron Sluben leading the way. He threw open a door, and we entered a very large room, which was packed with men and a few ladies, all in evening dress.

I touched Mr. Smith's arm.

"We shall be awfully out of it, in these clothes," I said.

"I don't think you need worry, Victor, you will always be conspicuous, whether you like it or not."

He knew my weakness.

Most of the occupants looked up as we entered, and a general hum of welcome arose.

"May I present to you Monsieur Stevens, who has just bested Goltz in the prettiest way imaginable; and Monsieur Carruthers, who accounted for two of our enemies," said Mr. Smith.

The hum of welcome changed to a cry of astonishment.

"Goltz? is he dead? how did it happen?" And a score of other questions were hurled at him.

"My friends," he said, "listen. This evening I was returning from you know where; I had just reached Monsieur Ducrot's house, when my chauffeur stopped the car and came to the door.

"Hullo," I said, 'what is wrong, what do you want?'

"You!" he replied.

"I had my sword-stick in the car with me, and opening the other door I jumped out. There were three more assailants; so, not wishing to lose certain papers which I carried, I ran away with all four of them following. I should certainly have been killed, if these two gentlemen had not helped me; I slipped, dropping my sword, Monsieur Stevens picked it up. Monsieur Carruthers stunned one man and engaged with another. When I regained my wits and my feet, he was kneeling on the fellow, and Peter, my trusted chauffeur, was trying to get at him with a knife. At that moment, Monsieur Stevens yelled out to his friend to remember his revolver. It reminded me that I also carried one. Peter died. Then we bound the other fellow, and turned to the fencers; to my horror, I saw that it was Goltz who was opposing my friend in need, but a moment later I saw who that friend was, recognising him as some one I had known since his birth, and had myself assisted to teach the use of a sword.

"I was so confident of his skill, that I induced Monsieur Carruthers not to interfere, and we stood by and watched. In a few moments, Goltz was on the ground, with a very pretty hole in him. Not dead, oh dear no, but it will be some time before he is upon his feet. That is the story. Now look at Monsieur Stevens well; remember the face of the man who overthrew the best swordsman in Rudarlia. You shall see him again, I promise you, but now I take him with me."

Before I could say anything, this astonishing man had ushered us both out of the room, closing and locking the door behind him.

Baron Sluben was outside too; but he was as puzzled as ourselves, until Mr.

Smith whispered something in his ear which caused him to glance at us keenly.

Mr. Smith turned to us.

"Victor, and you too, Rupert, you know you have my thanks, you can understand what I have in my heart. Some day, perhaps, I shall be able to thank you properly for more than you think, as I had papers of vast importance with me; and few of these people you have just seen would have been comfortable, had I lost them. However, you must leave Karena at once. My car is there; pick up Mr. Neville and your belongings, then without wasting a minute get out upon the Poiska road, from there to Orvlov, and then on to Soctia. Wait there at the Ivanoff Hotel until you hear from me, and speak to no one about this night. You can trust me to give you good advice. Sluben agrees with me."

"Personally, I should advise getting the other side of the frontier; his Majesty will be furious now Goltz is out of it for a time," said Baron Sluben.

"No, I have a reason for keeping them in the country; besides, no harm will come to them in Soctia. Thank God we still have one place of refuge. There is a British Consul there, and British ships in the harbour."

"But look here," said Carruthers, "I for one don't care about tearing off as if in a funk, you know."

"I hope it won't be for long; and, when I tell you that your going will make matters easier for me, I'm sure you won't object," said Mr. Smith soothingly.

"Oh, of course not."

"Thank you; will you remember that it is for the best, and make as much speed as possible getting out of Karena? And now au revoir, my dear lads; thank you for my life, and the lives of others."

Without saying anything more, we shook hands; Carruthers and I jumped into the car, and we were off.

I knew the town fairly well by this time, and had no difficulty in finding my way to the hotel. Carruthers went to see Mr. Neville and explain matters to him, while I interviewed the manager and settled our account. The gratuities I gave were large enough to make the recipients show their gratitude by doing all within their power to expedite our departure; to explain which, I informed the manager that sickness had recalled us to Paris, and that we should go through Bornia, by way of Agrade, as we had to pick up a friend. There was no malice in these untruths; but I thought it justifiable to mislead, under the circumstances.

An hour after reaching the hotel, we drove off; Mr. Neville inside, Carruthers with me.

Remembering Mr. Smith's advice, we did not waste time, so that soon after day-break we ran through Poiska; where Mr. Neville took my place, and we dozed off for a spell inside.

We had breakfast at a small inn, just off the high road; and did not stop again

until we reached Orvlov, where we lunched, and procured a supply of petrol for the motor.

From there, it was a pleasant run to the coast, through beautiful country; we did not hurry, the better to appreciate.

For a week or more, we stayed near the Hotel Ivanoff, merely killing time with bathing and boating; when, however, no message came from Karena we commenced to go farther afield, and explored the country and coast.

One day I found my conscience pricking me: there were letters which should have been answered. So I was left behind, while the others started for a day's excursion. Now, letter-writing never possessed any great attraction for me; and, after scribbling two or three, I thought the day was too fine to be wasted, so I took a book, an ample supply of smokables, also a luncheon basket, and, walking to a little place a mile or two from the town, hired a boat.

I worked off a good deal of superfluous energy; and then paddled gently up a small tributary of the Garude, which watered a beautiful part of Garace, that fair province which had been Rudarlian until some fifty years before, when the conquering Bornians had taken it.

I tied up the boat, jumped ashore, and made myself comfortable, with every prospect of enjoying a quiet afternoon. Having finished my lunch, and lighted my pipe, I stretched myself luxuriously on the soft grass, and began to read. The first chapter of the book held my attention, but the second and third bored me; so I closed the volume, pitched it into the boat, and settled myself down to think.

Acting on the advice of Mr. Neville, Carruthers and I had not discussed our experiences with Mr. Smith; we had agreed to wait until we heard from him, but I had thought a great deal of the incident. I knew now with certainty that he was a nobleman, that he was working against the present monarch, and the members of the party we had seen in the house were in the plot with him. I went over every detail of the evening, and came to the conclusion that he had had some ulterior motive in wishing me to get the better of Goltz. What it could be I could not guess, unless it was that he hoped some day to make me of use in his schemes; this struck me as the most probable solution to his having taken the trouble to introduce us to his fellow-conspirators. But why did he wish us to remain on Rudarlian soil? In Bornia we could have been nearer to him, if he had wanted us. Perhaps the time was close for him to strike, and perhaps the rebellion, if he intended to rebel, would start in Soctia.

What a grand day it was, and how beautiful all this country! It reminded me somewhat of the river at home: there was the same feeling of peace, the same silence, only broken by the ripple of the water, or the buzzing of insects. I closed my eyes for a second.

How many seconds passed before I opened them again, I have no idea, but

I must have slept very soundly; and I awakened slowly from a dream, in which Carruthers had fallen and hurt himself--he was groaning. So vivid had the illusion been, that I looked round for him as I awoke; there was no sign of him, of course, but the daintiest vision, in white, was sitting where I had thought to see him. The daintiest vision was nursing her ankle, with many little "ohs!" and "ahs!" For a second I did not move, the picture was too fascinating. Then I raised my length from the grass, and took off my hat. It had been very much over my eyes; so in courtesy I raised it, and put it back at a more becoming angle.

"Can I be of any assistance, mademoiselle?"

"Oh, thank you so much. I've hurt my ankle; if you would be so kind as to dip my handkerchief in the water----"

She looked up at me with a pair of eyes which she ought to have kept veiled, and held out a small wisp of white material. It was entirely inadequate for any purpose whatever, so I dipped my handkerchief instead.

"Perhaps you will permit me to bind it for you, it is so difficult to do it oneself."

"Thank you very much."

She removed her shoe and stocking, and a sweet slim foot was placed hesitatingly out; there was a very nasty scratch which must have been quite painful. I bound it up with great care, making my handkerchief nice and tidy, with hers placed over it.

"There, I think you will find that comfortable."

"Indeed, yes; I am extremely grateful to you. Are you a surgeon?"

"No, nothing so useful, I am afraid, merely a passer-by."

"Yes. Are you generally so successful?"

She laughed merrily; and I remembered the pose in which she must have first caught sight of me.

"I was passing time," I said gravely.

She was an extremely beautiful girl--extremely beautiful. I have repeated that statement, in order the better to explain why I forgot about everything, save the fact that she was sitting on the grass near me. It is so; all thoughts of action to be, all thoughts of things past, were as nothing compared to the witchery of this young wood-nymph's company.

It seemed almost as if we had been acquainted for years; there was no shyness, we simply talked and argued like two friends.

As the afternoon sped on, I began to feel that I had expected to meet her here, as if my whole being had existed for nothing else. Unquestionably she filled a space which before had been empty. There was no reason on my part; I couldn't have argued about my feelings at all, I had to accept them.

I flatter myself that the wounded ankle had been forgotten as completely as I

had failed to remember that I had to get back to Soctia; until the lengthening of the shadows drew our attention to the flight of time. Then, in haste, my companion must be off; she would under no circumstances hear of my accompanying her, as she lived but a few hundred yards away.

"And would it be possible for me to find you here to-morrow?" I asked as I bent over her hand in saying good-bye.

"Why, yes."

"Then expect me, mademoiselle."

We said good-bye. She gave me her hand for a second, and then turned and hurried up the grassy bank and disappeared; while with a light heart I untied my boat, and taking a last look in the direction the girl had gone, pushed off, and sculled towards Soctia.

I was quite happy; my thoughts were in a whirl certainly, but why trouble, what did anything matter, had I not met this divine creature?

I would be in the same place to-morrow, I should see her again, and learn her name. Not that I cared who she was; at that moment I would have proposed marriage to her, had she been a serving maid. I knew she was not that, of course; only a lady could have carried herself so perfectly, and her voice was exquisite in its soft melody.

In my youthfulness, I presumed that she on her side would be as ready as myself to meet again, and learn to know me better. I don't think that this was conceit on my part; but it had all come about so quickly and naturally that anything else would have seemed inconceivable to me.

I do not know what coin it was that I gave the man who took the boat from me; but it must have been of considerable value, to judge by the thanks he poured upon me.

Little did I dream, as I walked up to the hotel, of the awful news that awaited me.

Mr. Neville met me as I raced up to the hotel; and the look on his face checked any exuberance in my greeting.

"My boy," he said as we entered my room, "I have very bad news for you: your stepfather is, I am afraid, very ill."

He handed me the telegram which had brought the bad news, and I read:

"Your stepfather is dying come."

As if in a dream, I said good-bye to Carruthers, who was to await Mr. Smith's message; got into the car with Mr. Neville, and we were off.

Of the journey that followed, I have the vaguest remembrance; I was too miserable. My stepfather had become so much to me; I loved him as well as though he had been my own father. I think that I have known few men who could, with so much right, say: "I have lived as a gentleman should."

Oh, the interminable waits, the stupidity of porters and booking clerks, the slowness of that short journey from Calais to Dover. I felt as though we had to travel round the world, and yet we accomplished an awkward journey in remarkable time.

At our little station, I found Bauen waiting; but he could give us no reassuring news, the best being that he was still alive.

My mother was in the bedroom when I arrived; and, after kissing her, we stood together, hand in hand, gazing down upon what had been such a magnificent specimen of manhood, but which was now the mere husk of what had been.

He lay without movement, it seemed as though even then he might be dead. As we stood silently, with all our nerves taut and overstrung, I prayed that he might open his eyes once more, and speak to me. I think my prayer was heard, for, just as Mr. Neville came in and stood by us, the dying man's eyes opened, and, perfectly conscious, he tried to smile at Mr. Neville. Then to my mother he murmured two words, full of love and pride, "My wife." When they rested on me, as I stood swallowing down my tears, he said, "Why, Victor, my boy." His eyes closed for a moment, then opened again. "God save your Majesty!" he cried; the next moment he was gone.

Stunned by the suddenness of his departure, I turned to my mother, who was standing quite still, with the tears streaming down her cheeks. I put my arms round her, but she broke away and flung herself down with her arms around the dead man's neck, and cried as though her heart were broken.

Her grief, or rather the greatness of it, surprised me, for in all my life until then I had never seen my mother give way. I had had no idea that her feelings for my stepfather had been so strong; she had always appeared so calm and cold that I had never given her credit for any deep feelings, much as I loved her. Her grief for some time was so overpowering that I could do nothing; but presently, as her sobs grew less racking I took her in my arms and did my poor best to console her. Then little by little she seemed to regain control over herself, and I persuaded her to go to her own room.

I returned to the bed-side, and all alone stood there, indulging my sorrow. I registered a vow, as I gazed down at the now peaceful face, that I would do all that I could to live a life as free from stain as his had been, and to try and act in a way which would have given him pride in me.

I think the three most miserable days of my life were those that followed my stepfather's death. He was buried on the third day. How unhappy I was then, both on account of the loss we had suffered and other things which followed.

Mr. Smith attended the funeral. I felt no surprise at his appearing just before we left the house; it had seemed part of the mystery of my life that he should be there. I did not think of our last meeting, nor of how he could have come so

quickly on our tracks, nor did I wonder at the first words I heard him speak to my mother: "It is time."

Usually I should have pondered deeply on such things, but now I was too unhappy.

I was alone in my study, that room which had been my nursery; and I sat by the window wondering, for I had heard as though in a dream that my stepfather had been an enormously wealthy man, and had bequeathed me all. How much it was the solicitor could not tell me, but in England alone he had invested something over ten millions of pounds, and I understood that there was more than that sum invested about the world. It was stupendous, and though I did not realise it, although I did not understand what my power in the world would be, I groaned at thought of the endless labour such a vast inheritance would involve.

Heart-sick and weary, I looked out over the sunlit river and recalled the events of the last few days, sorrowing at the thought that I could never discuss with my stepfather those things of which I had been full: our meeting with Quarovitch, the incident of the brigands, my fight with Goltz, and finally my little friend of the riverside, the girl whose name even I did not know.

My stepfather's last words came to my mind: "God save your Majesty!" What could they mean? I supposed that it was some memory of the past, for I knew he had been in the diplomatic service.

There was a tap at the door, and Mr. Neville entered. My stepfather's death had affected him very much, for a great friendship existed between the two. He came to me and placed his hand upon my shoulder.

"Victor, my dear boy, I hate to disturb you, but your mother has asked me to fetch you; it appears that the time has come when you are to be told all those things which have so puzzled you. It seems hard that it should have come just now, but who knows? It may be for the best. Your future may offer many hard and hateful features; but when it is a case of duty, you, I know, can be depended on. Always remember that you will have people who love you to help and direct you, and over them all is our Maker."

We descended together; but, when we came to the door of the room where my mother and Mr. Smith were sitting, he turned and would not have entered, had not my mother insisted upon his being present. I bent to kiss her as I passed, and her arms went round my neck, as she returned the caress, murmuring:

"My boy, my dear boy."

I sat down on a low settee by her side, and waited for her to speak.

Inwardly, I was a mass of nerves. I had waited so long to hear all I was now to be told; I felt strangely nervous, as though evil was coming. How would the revelations affect my life?

"I think you had better speak, Count," said my mother.

"One minute," I said. "Tell me your name first, please, Mr. Smith."

"Count von Zeula."

"Thank you." I nodded, well satisfied, for the name was well known to me. Many things had been done for Rudarlia, by men bearing that name, during some hundreds of years.

"I shall want all your attention, Victor, as what I have to tell you may come as a shock, and first I must relate a little story, a story which at the time of its happening was in everybody's mouth. It is a story of misery.

"Twenty years or so ago, a good King sat upon the throne of Rudarlia; he was loved by the greater part of his subjects, and in return he dedicated his life to their welfare, whole-heartedly and devotedly.

"Unfortunately, there were men, nobles, who found that his rule was injurious to their interests, these interests being the right to fill their exchequers from the pockets of the lower classes.

"They conspired with the next heir to the throne, who was more to their liking.

"Then the King married, and his wife gave birth to a son, amid the joyful acclamations of the nation.

"The conspirators redoubled their activity. They bought over a few officers, and some hundreds of the private soldiers. They waited a favourable opportunity, working secretly all the while; then raised a scare of war. The loyal officers in immediate attendance on their Majesties were sent away. The King reviewed a regiment, an assassin shot him dead."

Mr. Smith brushed a hand across his eyes, was silent for a moment, and then continued:

"That night a cry was raised that justice had been done, for they swore the dead King had meant to betray them to their fancied enemies.

"The next step was to incite the lowest class of the people, urging them to attack the King's Palace where the Queen and her child lay. Sweeping into the Royal apartments, they shot them both, presumably; then, frightened at their own atrocity, they ran away. The next day, Ivan was proclaimed King; he had been waiting just over the border.

"A rumour got abroad that some miscreant had set fire to the bedchamber of the Queen, when she had been murdered. This was not so--it was I who set the bed on fire to burn the bodies on it."

"My God!" I said.

"They, however, were not the remains of the Queen and her child, the King, but those of a groom's wife and offspring, whose lives were unfortunately sacrificed to save the Royal Mother and the baby King. No one looked too closely into the matter, a few of the royal jewels were there, and the Queen's clothing, also

the charred bodies; but the Queen herself and her child were in safety."

"Is the child alive?" I cried breathlessly.

"He is," said Mr. Smith gravely.

"And you are working for him. Oh, thank God, I can see the way clearly now; let me do something to help."

"Eh?"

"Ever since I first went to Rudarlia, I have been trying to find some way out, and could discover no plan to work on, for Ivan's heir, they say, is as bad as he is--but now--a King of Merlin's blood. Oh, thank God! Tell me the groom's name, is he alive?" In my excitement I had risen and was bending over him.

I looked into his eyes as his face was raised to mine; they were full of tears.

"His name, Victor, is Bauen."

"Bauen--Bauen!--our Bauen?"

"Your Bauen."

"Then why is he here, what does it mean?" I looked at my mother, her face was buried in her hands.

"It means," said Mr. Smith, rising from his chair, "that you are the King of Rudarlia; and I, your very humble servant."

He seized my hand and kissed it.

CHAPTER VI

"You are the King of Rudarlia," I repeated.

I looked at him blankly, he kept his eyes fixed on mine; at my mother, her face was buried in her hands, and I saw her shake with sobs; lastly I turned to Mr. Neville, and to him I held out my hand.

"Tell me that it is not true, tell me-- Oh, my God!--can't you? won't you say he is joking?" My voice, which was hoarse, cracked with the strain of keeping from screaming.

"It is true, Victor."

"Then nothing on God's earth shall make me take the throne--nothing--I swear that I----" I leaned against the table for support. "Mother--mother, is this what you have kept from me, this awful thing? Can't one of you speak?--am I to be hurled into a throne?--My God--I won't, I won't."

I collapsed into a chair, and buried my head in my arms; that this should

have come to me, that my life should be suddenly cropped of its freedom, that I should be bound hand and foot-- Oh, my God, hadn't there been some other way to try me?

I looked up, and found that I was crying; damn the tears! I brushed them away, and caught Mr. Smith's eye; he was looking at me sadly as though ashamed of my behaviour.

I felt suddenly as though ice had been placed on my spine, and shivered. Was this the best I could do? My dead stepfather, what would he have thought? What did Mr. Neville think?

I remembered Colonel von Quarovitch, and his ragged troops. Those other brave men turned into brigands by oppression. The gathering of gentlefolk in Mr. Smith's house. Mr. Smith himself, who had planned and plotted so many years for me. And lastly my mother; what could she be thinking of her son? I felt Mr. Neville's hand on my shoulder, and gave a weak little laugh.

"I'm a pretty spectacle for a King," I said quietly, "a most noble and worthy specimen. Mother dear, look up--it's all over, you shall never hear another kick from me. And you, Mr. Smith, you acclaimed me as King. Very well, I will be King; such a King as you may wish--with God's help--and--and--all of you might forgive me for being such a rotter."

Mr. Smith seized my hand again and kissed it. Tears were running down his cheeks; and they were not unmanly. My outbreak had unnerved him, for he had no doubt seen the edifice of his building fall in ruins before him; but it had been the sudden relief at hearing my acceptance which had caused the tears.

"May God bless your Majesty!" he said.

My dear old tutor's arm was round my shoulders, and I heard him murmur:

"My boy, my boy, I am proud of you."

I bent over my mother.

"Mother dear, don't cry, or I shall think you cannot forgive me. I will be King, and will try to rule as my father did."

She looked up then and smiled.

"I'm crying now because I am so happy."

None of us spoke for a few minutes; perhaps we needed the time to pull ourselves together. I did for one, then I said:

"Now that I have settled that I am going to be King, it might be advisable for Mr. Smith to give us any information on the subject which he thinks fit; but first I should like to know why he wished us to remain in Rudarlia?"

He considered a little before saying:

"Because the time is at hand: Ivan is on his deathbed. You must be there to take his place when he dies; I have everything arranged; they trusted me to produce the King."

"And will no one think that I am an impostor?"

"I fancy not; several of us have known of your identity, they have worked with me. There are thousands of people who will know your mother, and there is Bauen; I do not think there are many who will deny his testimony, once his part of the affair is known; also, you have on your arm a mark, which will be recognised by the doctor who attended at your birth."

"When will it be necessary for us to depart?"

"To-morrow. It was your wounding Goltz which put the finishing touch to him; they say his rage was terrible. They told him the whole affair had been arranged by me. He was very ill before, but that finished him."

"But to-morrow, is it absolutely essential that we should go so soon?"

"Quite, you must meet the leaders of the party as soon as possible; you may be assured that Ivan's sycophants will not allow Prince Alexis to remain in ignorance of his cousin's state. In all probability he will be in Karena before us."

"If he is, we must turn him out as quickly as he came."

"We will," said Mr. Smith with emphasis.

And there we left it for the time. I took Mr. Neville away for an hour, up to my room, where we sat by the window in the chairs which I had left so willingly, to hear those things which I now wished unheard. We looked out on the river, and the sight of the sparkling water brought back to me the last afternoon I had spent in Garace, and the girl; I sighed, and turned to my companion.

"My dear old friend," I said, "you will understand me when I tell you that the news this afternoon has completely thrown me off my balance; that all my plans have come down with a smash; that the idea of kingly power has no charm for me; that I would sooner be a subaltern in the Rudarlian army, with a frayed cap, than wear all the kingly regalia. My life in England has taught me the joys of freedom too well; I tell you candidly, that I fear the future. I dread it, the more so now, as in all probability I shall have to make a marriage that will be to the benefit of the state, and I had other dreams."

He looked at me quickly.

"Is there anyone?" he asked.

I felt myself growing red.

"It may be only calf-love, but I don't think so, yet I have only seen her once. I don't even know her name, but the moment I saw her I knew that I loved her."

"Tell me about it," he said.

I had half feared that he would laugh at me, but he only looked rather sad and decidedly sympathetic. So emboldened, I blurted out in a shamed way the story of my meeting with the girl.

He listened in silence until I had finished, then he held out his hand to me.

"My boy," he said, "a very similar thing happened to me when I was about

your age. I thought that I had lost all interest in life when she married some one else; unluckily, I had nothing in my life to fill the gap; I let myself become a mere machine in my work. I was morose, refusing to look for help to the quarter from which real assistance can come; I mean from God. And then one day, when I was thinking of all my misery, the thought flashed over me that perhaps it was a trial, perhaps I was being tested; and that idea won the day. I believed then, as I do now, that, no matter what trials come to us, there is thought and purpose behind them.

"Our finite minds cannot hope to understand the workings of an infinite one, so my advice to you is this: do with all your might those things that you think it your duty to do, and leave the results to God. Man cannot be infallible. You will make mistakes; profit by them; try to forget your own sorrows in healing those of your country.

"In time you will be able to look at everything with a fresh sense of perspective.

"Love, if it should come to you with your marriage, will, I daresay, be of inestimable value to you. What you feel now may be more the feelings of sexual attraction than the fuller love of comradeship and mental sympathy; love does enter Royal marriages, in spite of the cynics."

"I will try to think as you suggest," I said. "But there are other things of which I wish to talk to you. To begin with, will you come with me to Rudarlia, will you continue to be my friend and adviser as you have been up to now? I know that once I am on the throne I shall always have to have Rudarlians about me; but my own private friends they cannot object to. As my private secretary, you will always be near me to help and advise. Will you come?"

"It may cause jealousy."

"I can't help it if it does. After Ivan and his many mistresses, they will have to allow me one man friend; and I believe they will be pleased to."

"Then I will come."

"Now one thing more, will you stay here and look after my mother until she can come to Rudarlia?"

"Of course I will, if she wishes it."

We sat up until three in the morning discussing ways and means; but made no attempt to listen to more than a bare outline of what Mr. Smith had arranged. It would all have to come out gradually, in time I should no doubt learn how he had worked so successfully; he stuck to the principal things and nothing could side-track him. I slept for two hours, and then went to see Bauen.

It was a great day for him; he was to come to Karena with us. He had been looking forward for twenty years to seeing me upon my throne.

I believe that his soul was wrapped up in one idea, that of doing his duty

to my family. I doubt if any man, noble or commoner, had ever served a Royal family with such self-sacrifice and devotion.

He had given his wife and only child, to save my mother and myself; and had exiled himself for twenty years from friends and country, to continue in our service. God bless him.

We, that is Mr. Smith and I, spent the day with my solicitor, attending to some of the business entailed by my inheritance. Then, in the evening, we embarked on the journey which would bring either a crown or death to me.

I say "death" advisedly; for, should anything have gone wrong with Mr. Smith's plans, it was hardly likely that Alexis and his followers would allow me to live.

I am glad to be able to feel that the thought of danger rather pleased me than otherwise.

We had cabled to Carruthers to meet us at Ruln, a frontier post, much farther south than Melanov.

We did not waste a moment of the time our journey consumed. Mr. Smith was instructing me in the education of a King.

At Ruln we had two hours to wait, according to the time-table; but, by lavish bribery, Mr. Smith secured a special to take us as far as the junction, at Katalona.

Leaving Bauen in charge of the luggage--which was light--we went in search of Carruthers.

We found him seated upon a bench, the picture of glumness.

"Hullo, Splosh!" he cried, his face lighting up at sight of us. "What a forsaken place this is. I've been here five hours, and only spoken to one man, who thinks he came from 'the thigh of Jupiter,' to judge by his side. Look, there he is."

A dissipated looking young man, of about my own age, had slouched out on to the platform, followed by a couple of older men, both of whom were muffled up in overcoats, in spite of the fact that it was a warm evening.

I heard Mr. Smith draw in a hissing breath, and turned to where he had been standing.

"Hist! don't look my way, I am just in the doorway to your left; walk towards me, and stop opposite. I don't wish to be seen--that is Prince Alexis."

"Who?" asked Carruthers.

"An enemy, old man, you shall know everything in a little while."

I looked with interest at my rival, though I took good care not to allow him to see it.

If ever a man of his age had vice written clearly upon his face, he had; and I thought to myself that it would go even worse with Rudarlia under his rule than under Ivan's, should he ever come to the throne. There was cruelty, craftiness, and gross sensuality in his countenance.

Luckily, after walking up and down the platform two or three times, in close conversation with his companions, he disappeared once more into the miserable room. As he did so, an official approached and, with many bows, informed us that our special was waiting, a few yards down the track, with our baggage on board.

Mr. Smith kept his face turned away, as we passed the window of the room where Alexis was sitting. In ten minutes, we were a mile or more away from Ruln.

The pace at which we were travelling caused the single coach to rock and rattle horribly; so much so, that it was necessary for Carruthers to sit very close to me to hear what I said, as I had to speak in a low tone.

He was amazed and delighted that, as he expressed it, his old Splosh was going to be a King.

Then the silly fellow insisted upon kissing my hand and generally playing the fool; I think he did it to keep my spirits up.

Mr. Smith looked on with a grim smile. I fancy he thought that stern realities would come soon enough.

There was a basket of provisions in the carriage; and, when we had finished our meal, he advised me to try to sleep. I took his advice, and slept like a log until he awoke me with the news that we were just getting into Katalona.

Two soldiers were lounging upon the platform as we alighted. I noticed that they saluted as we passed them, and then followed us at a little distance.

In less than an hour the car in which we had driven from the junction pulled up at Mr. Smith's house.

The driver followed us in.

Without speaking, Mr. Smith led the way into a room fitted up as a library; it was still dark, so he switched on the electric light. At the same moment, three other men entered the room. Bauen had come in with us.

He assisted me to remove my covert-coat; then, bowing deeply, stood back.

Mr. Smith advanced a step towards me.

"Your Majesty," he said, "would you remove your coat, and show your right arm to these gentlemen?"

Without a word I did so.

Just above my elbow, I have three small red marks. They are triangular in shape; birthmarks, I think they are called.

The three men came nearer, and I held out my arm for their inspection.

The first to examine it was a white-haired old man, who trembled violently as he bent over. He seized my hand and kissed it.

"God bless your Majesty."

The other two did the same.

"Count Belen and Count von Maark will be here to-day, if further testimony is needed; we have here, as well, Bauen, the groom," said Mr. Smith.

"No further identification is necessary," declared the old man, and bowing the three withdrew.

Mr. Smith had prepared me for this, so I was not surprised, but I did not know who these three men were, and asked him.

"The white-haired one was the doctor who attended your Majesty's mother, at the time of your birth; the other two are Prince von Venoff and Baron von Casile."

He bowed as he spoke. I glanced round, as I was surprised at his ceremonious behaviour: the driver of the car was still in the room.

"Surely, Count," I said, "there is some one here whom I should know?" And I smiled towards the man.

"May I present, to your Majesty, Colonel Woolgast, who commands the body-guard?"

The Colonel bent to kiss my hand, but I prevented him; seized his instead, and shook it.

"Until I am King," I said, "I will shake your hand and call you 'Colonel'; when I am King, you shall kiss my hand, but I will call you 'General.'"

He became red with pleasure; and, by the twinkle in Mr. Smith's eye, I knew that I had done right to make a friend of this man.

Colonel Woolgast having left the room, I turned to Mr. Smith.

"Have you done anything about Prince Alexis?" I asked.

"I am sending a man to watch him. Woolgast will see to it that he does not enter the Royal apartments. In a little time you will have to receive a great number of people; I will be by your side to tell you what I can of them, to give you a better idea of what to say. All are devoted to Rudarlia. I am glad you said what you did to Woolgast, he is not titled, you know, and some rather snub him on that account; but he is a good man, loyal to a degree to his country."

"Are there any members of the government?"

"Not one; they cannot be trusted, all being Ivan's parasites."

"How will that affect our plans, surely the Minister of War will have something to say?"

"He is the worst hated man among them, the soldiers execrate him."

"H'm! I shall look to you for a New Cabinet."

"Your Majesty will need one, as all the present members will be in our power by to-night, I trust. General von Vorkovitch will give orders to the troops for that."

"How is it that he has not been retired by Ivan?"

"Even Ivan did not dare to touch the man who won the battle of Vortz. He has been the idol of the country for years, but had no chance of doing anything to retrieve matters."

"Jealousy?" I asked.

"Chiefly, there was no one to be the head, that was why we had to wait until you came to an age fit for it."

We had no time for more conversation, as the sound of motors approaching warned us that people were arriving to pay me homage.

I stood at one end of the room--which was very large--and waited. Mr. Smith was at my right, a little behind me; Carruthers and Bauen behind him again. My ordeal began.

The first few to arrive were soldiers, officers commanding regiments now in Karena.

These I thanked for their loyalty, and asked a few questions about their commands.

They looked at me with well-bred curiosity. At my request, Carruthers was made known to them by Mr. Smith, and he stood chatting with them while I devoted myself to the ever-flowing tide of fresh arrivals.

They were not all men, some dozen ladies being among them. One of these, a grand old lady with snow-white hair, had been a friend of my mother's. So Mr. Smith whispered as she came towards me.

I kissed her hand and asked her to extend her friendship to me for my mother's sake.

"Your Majesty should have more self-confidence," she replied.

And when I laughingly hinted that she should teach me, she laughed in reply and told me that, had she been forty years younger, she would have been charmed.

I assured her, with an air of astonishment, that I thought babies were useful to teach patience only.

This pleased her mightily, for she remarked that her sex would be no better off by my replacing Ivan, for whilst he ruled women with writing, I should do it with speaking.

This delicately veiled gibe at Ivan, for his predilection for paying vast sums of money to his mistresses by cheque, pleased those who heard it tremendously.

"Prince Kleber, he prides himself on his fencing," this from Mr. Smith.

I looked at the haughty, cold face before me.

"Ah, Prince," I said after the customary salutations, "some day I hope that you will give me a lesson or two with the foils."

The haughty look vanished in a second.

"Your Majesty is too kind; I am flattered."

"The kindness will be yours, Prince, if you will give me the lessons."

"But what could I teach your Majesty, who gave Goltz such a fine thrust?"

"A trick, Prince; but what I wish from you is the sounder play, and the knowledge of some of those thrusts of which, no doubt, you have the secret."

I found out afterwards that Mr. Smith's words had been of inestimable value, for this was his weak point: no one could flatter him too much about his sword-play. In other things he was unapproachable; but from that day to this Prince Kleber and I have been very great friends.

The room was filling up now, and I saw Mr. Smith's face wreathed in smiles, from which I surmised that I was playing my part well.

There was a little commotion in the crowd, and General von Vorkovitch was announced.

He was much older than I had anticipated, bowed, and rather shaky.

He would have bent in homage, had I not anticipated it by advancing a step or two and taking his hand.

"Your Majesty," he said slowly, "I have waited for this day, praying that I might be spared to see my King upon the throne of Rudarlia."

"General, before I knew that I was to be a King, even when a little boy at school, I thought of and longed to see the victor of Vortz, so God has been good to us both." I turned to Bauen. "A chair for General von Vorkovitch." Then turning to the old man, I continued, "Sit, General, we shall want all your strength, perhaps, to win us more battles."

The last to arrive was the editor of the most influential paper in Rudarlia, a man of much importance. His articles on the abuse of power had more than once caused the suppression of his paper, and exile or imprisonment to himself.

I was talking to him, when Mr. Smith made me a sign; I knew what it meant, and nodded.

He immediately commanded silence. Instantly a hush fell on the groups of excited men and women, and they formed a circle round me.

My speech was an impromptu one, the first of many, for I have found that, when one speaks without preparation, one often gets home to the hearts of one's hearers.

"To all of you here this morning, I have a few words to say. God made me, by birth, your King; you, by the loyalty and devotion you have shown, have brought me near the throne. I thank you in my murdered father's name and my own. If it is willed that I shall fill the place you would have me fill, I promise you that Rudarlia shall have a monarch who thinks of his country first in all things, and that unjust taxation, favouritism, and wanton waste of public moneys shall be unknown while I have the honour to be your King. Once again I thank you."

They were very simple words, but their effect was extraordinary; carried away no doubt by their excitement and joy, they cheered, and cheered again. I heard Carruthers' voice as he hurrahed like one possessed; and I felt that indeed I was a King come into my own.

It was ten in the morning before the last of the visitors drove off, and we

were left alone.

I felt very tired, and I cannot truthfully say happy. Events had moved so quickly that I had had no time for my private griefs; perhaps it was lucky.

Soon after we breakfasted; and then I had to receive church dignitaries, but their business did not occupy much time. I had been born into the Catholic Church, and had a great love for it, so there was nothing to upset the churchmen, once I had given my word to uphold and cherish their faith. Their power, which was considerable, had been against Ivan from the first, for he had abused and scoffed at all religion, being himself a gross materialist.

The Archbishop blessed me, and assured me of the support of his clergy.

When they had gone, Mr. Smith ran over again the various factions who had been gained to our side; and it appeared that the only enemies we were likely to have were the newly created nobles and useless officials, together with a small number of idealists who held theories, always impracticable.

"I know," said Mr. Smith, "that nearly the whole nation will rejoice to have your father's son upon the throne. You have made friends of every one who came to-day, one and all went away rejoicing. I have done all I can now to make the way smooth; but it rests in God's hands, Victor. His will be done."

"Amen," I said.

We lapsed into silence for a few minutes, and then he continued:

"The Press will have a scoop to-morrow. I thought it best to leave to them the writing of the first news; it will be necessary, however, for you to make a declaration, simple and short, as your speech this morning. I could never have believed those people could have so far forgotten the Royal presence, their feelings must have been very great."

"All the better, it shows how they love Rudarlia."

"Some day it will be their King as well," said Mr. Smith.

And inwardly I hoped that it might be so.

"How are we to know when to go?" I asked.

"They will let me know from the Palace; the news of Ivan's death will not be told until we choose. Every one, save the doctors, nurses, and Woolgast, will have been kept from the sick-room all to-day. One of the doctors is our man; the other will be when he finds that he is practically a prisoner."

"But the Queen? I have never until now thought of her."

"The Queen, poor lady, has confined herself more and more these last few years to her own suite. She rarely goes out, never entertains; I think Ivan broke her heart soon after they were married."

"But what will become of her?"

"That will rest with your Majesty."

"Is she loved by anyone?"

"All those who know her intimately say that she is grieved to the heart at the misery caused by Ivan and his gang; all the little money that she has had has gone in charity."

"Ah!" I said.

"I have had made," said my companion, to turn the subject, I thought, "a number of uniforms, as near as possible to your measure. To-day I think it would be as well if you put on that of the Guard, not here, but at the Palace. I think they will fit you, as I had one of your suits to measure from."

There was something pathetic to me in all these little preparations of Mr. Smith's. I felt like a boy leaving for school, when his father is adding some little thing that might give him pleasure.

The thought of all the years spent by this elderly man working and planning, so that I might some day be seated on the throne, gave me a lump in the throat, and I bent and kissed him.

"Victor, my dear boy, God knows I wish you had been son of mine; I could not have loved you more."

"In future," I said quietly, "you shall be as my father; you guide and teach me kingcraft. I only wish I could do something to show my gratitude."

"Ah, my boy, be yourself, trust to your conscience with regard to Rudarlia, and I shall be happy in my pride--but who is this?"

It was Baron Sluben who knocked and entered. He came up to me and bowed low.

"The usurper is dead; long live the King!"

I know that from that minute I felt one, I do not know why.

Mr. Smith took a pair of revolvers from a desk, handed one to me and put the other in his pocket.

"Come," he said, "it is time."

The three of us went out to the car. I felt cool, and made some cheerful remark to Carruthers.

"Good old Splosh, what is it to be, 150 not out?"

"Or a duck," I said.

Sluben, who understood a little English, looked at Mr. Smith with a puzzled expression on his face.

"It is all right, Baron," he said, answering the look, "his Majesty is talking of an English game."

"But the duck, Count, is it alive or for dinner?"

This was too much for us; and we laughed heartily while explaining.

I think our high spirits must have been contagious, for we were continually laughing all the way to the Palace, where we entered by a back door.

Colonel Woolgast was waiting. After assuring us that all was well, he, at

my request, led the way to a room on the same floor as the Royal apartments.

Here, as Mr. Smith had stated, I found the uniforms laid out, and Bauen waiting.

In twenty minutes I was dressed, and looked at myself in a tall cheval glass.

I looked very nice indeed, the white and gold uniform set off my figure to the utmost, while the plumed helmet added to my height and general impressiveness. Even Carruthers admitted that I looked like a King, and a fine one, too, which was great praise from him, who was not given to paying me compliments.

I wore across my chest the broad ribbon of the "Star of Rudarlia" with its splendid insignia in diamonds and gold, which Mr. Smith fastened to my tunic.

At length, all was ready, and Woolgast slipped from the room.

Ten minutes later, came the sullen boom of a cannon; and the people who heard it knew that King Ivan was dead.

CHAPTER VII

I walked to the window and looked out into the square below. As I did so, I noticed an unusual stir among the people who were passing. Every one seemed to be flocking to the Palace; the gates were wide open; and a continual stream of motor-cars and carriages kept entering and leaving. This was evidently an unusual sight, for the ordinary passers-by gathered at the entrances to watch, and most probably wonder. Then I noticed newspapers being sold, and the hum of many excited voices could be heard. I turned to Mr. Smith.

"Can they know already, do you think?"

"Undoubtedly, I have seen to that, and in all the chief cities of your Majesty's kingdom; they will know as fast as the telegrams can be sent."

Woolgast had left the room, but now returned and came up to where I was standing.

"I have to report, your Majesty, that Prince Alexis has just entered the Palace, and been arrested."

"That is good news, Colonel; I was fearing that he might be troublesome."

I think Mr. Smith had rather feared the same thing, for I heard him heave a sigh of relief.

"That eases my mind," he said. "It will be a bloodless *coup d'état*, after all."

"Thanks to the excellence of your plans."

"And the loyal co-operation of all those people who knew; a single word might have spoilt all. As it is, there is nothing now to prevent your Majesty entering the throne room."

"I am ready."

"Then let us go."

He threw open the door and I passed out. My body-guard were drawn up ready to attend me; I saluted them as I came out of the room, and they fell in behind me. This affair was not to be marked by much state, but Mr. Smith had seen to it that there was enough. That is to say, there were ushers and heralds, with other functionaries, who preceded me to clear the way, and throw wide the great doors which led into the throne room. I felt that I would sooner have seen the spectacle from the other end, or in one of the galleries; but that was not to be, so I entered bravely, although my heart did beat a trifle more rapidly than usual.

The place seemed packed from floor to roof; whichever way I turned, there were smiling faces. A deafening shout greeted me. These good people evidently could not restrain their joy at thoughts of the restoration of the beloved dynasty of the Stephanovitchs.

I stood on the edge of the dais, and smiled for very joy at the acclamations; pride, too, had its way, and I was pleased to think that I was King. It was so much nicer than I had anticipated. Mr. Smith, by my side, held up his hand, and almost immediately there was silence.

A gorgeous figure, clad in robes which no King could rival, stepped forward; there was a fanfare of trumpets, and then:

"King Ivan is dead, God save King Victor!"

"Speak to them," said Mr. Smith.

"Rudarlians"--how funny my voice sounded, I could hardly believe that I was speaking--"I am the son of Merlin. I am your King, Rudarlia is my country. Help me therefore to undo the errors of my predecessor; give me your loyalty, and together we will give new life to our beloved country, and keep her clean from tyrannous injustice. Help me, and we will make it a proud boast when a man can say: 'I am a Rudarlian.'"

For the second time that day, my words seemed to meet with approval, for my stepping back was the signal for another hurricane of cheers. I thought they would never stop, and that low fellow Carruthers said, loud enough for me to hear, to Mr. Smith:

"He ought to get in with a thumping majority."

Mr. Smith had told me that from time immemorial, on such occasions, the King always walked straight down the hall and up a broad stairway at the other end, and so back to his own apartments. As it had been the custom, I saw no reason to break away from it, so once more the heralds cleared the way for me;

and I passed through the long hall, between two lines of bowing people, who laughed and cried at the same time.

Under my father's rule there had been a golden age for Rudarlia, and this must account for the extraordinary enthusiasm with which I was greeted. We went, some dozen in all, to a room overlooking the main entrance to the Palace; and from there we watched the people gathering in hundreds, to hear from those who passed out--whatever they did hear.

They seemed pleased with the news, whatever it was, for they turned their faces to the Palace and shouted. It was not only the people who appeared gay, but presently the shops as well; flags and coloured ribbons began to be displayed. Then men came with great placards: "God Save Victor II., Merlin's Son," in red letters on a yellow ground. Some one had stage-managed the thing very well, nothing had been forgotten.

As I looked down upon the heaving mass of men and women, an irresistible longing came over me to ride out among them, to go to the Cathedral, and thank God that no blood had been shed in this, my triumph.

"Count," I said, turning to Mr. Smith, "is there any reason why I should not go now to the Cathedral?"

He looked at me hesitatingly for a moment.

"Not if your Majesty wills it," he said quickly.

"Then I will go, for there are a number of good citizens in danger of being crushed, down there, in their eagerness to catch sight of me."

"I will order your Majesty's carriage."

"No! I will ride."

Colonel Woolgast had returned; and I told him of my intention.

He looked anxious; and asked whether he should call out troops to line the way.

"Troops?" I said, perhaps foolhardily. "No, Colonel, just my own body-guard, half to clear a way, and the other half to follow. I will begin, as I intend to go on, by trusting the people. Count Zeula, I should be pleased if you would ride with me; and you, too, gentlemen, if so inclined."

"Thank God we shall have a King," I heard some one mutter, and then Mr. Smith and I were alone again, waiting for our horses.

"Am I wise?" I asked.

"Yes, Victor, I think you are, only I am nervous for your safety."

"I feel that nothing could hurt me to-day," I said, laughing. "But there is one thing I have forgotten, I wish Bauen to ride with us, to let the people see that loyalty such as his is not forgotten by my family."

"God made you a King before ever you came to Rudarlia, Victor."

And, at something in his voice, I felt myself blushing.

I shall never forget that ride. The great cry that arose as the body-guard wheeled into the courtyard; the instantaneous sundering of the crowd to make a way as the gates were swung open.

Unaffectedly I rejoiced, as I rode through them, some ten yards behind the last rank of the vanguard, with Mr. Smith half a length behind me; Woolgast, Carruthers, Bauen and the rest two lengths behind him again.

I was almost deafened by the shouts of welcome that arose from the crowd.

A child, escaping from his mother's restraining hand, ran under my horse's feet. In a moment I was out of my saddle, and had the little thing in my arms, sobbing, frightened, but unhurt.

A halt had been called; and the mother, a poor ragged woman, approached, terrified, trembling. I gave the boy into her arms, with two or three pieces of gold.

"Take him, my good woman," I said, "and keep him, for one day Rudarlia may have need of him."

The crowd grew delirious; they burst through the restraining arms, surrounded me, cheering and blessing me. For some little time they were hysterical in their expressions of loyalty, until I had to stand up in my stirrups and ask them to make way for me. At the sound of my voice they once again surged back, and our cortège passed on.

Luckily, it was not a great way to the Cathedral, or I doubt if we should have reached it before nightfall. As it was, it was six o'clock before we started on our homeward journey.

So dense was the crowd, that we went at a walk the whole way; the more adventurous would press forward, and touching my boot, bridle, anything, were contented.

They were a good-natured mass of people; and, although the jostling and discomfort must have been appalling, I heard never a single oath or bad-tempered remark, only blessings, and heart-felt utterances of joy.

We were within sight of the Palace, when I saw the escort which rode before me divide into two parts, and down the middle came six beautiful girls, carrying great bunches of flowers; some enthusiast had organised the party, and ransacked a florist's shop evidently.

The crowd swept back, and left a clear space around them.

One little maid, who was in advance, came timidly up to me, as I sat on my horse, laughing down at them.

She was too tongue-tied to say anything, so she just held up a bunch of white roses for me to take. She was so tiny, and looked so sweetly pretty, that I could not resist dismounting; and, picking up the little one, kissed her, at the same time taking the roses, and fastening them somehow into my tunic.

Seeing this, some wit in the crowd called out:

"The others want payment too."

And this idea caught on to such an extent that I was obliged to kiss all the other blushing five, to the delight of the onlookers. Mr. Smith laughed heartily; and even the stern-faced troopers looked away to hide their emotion.

That, however, was the last delay we had; and shortly after we turned in through the Palace gates.

Jove! how hot and tired I was, I remember it to this day, and the gorgeous relief when, in my own apartments, I bathed and put on cool evening dress.

In spite of fatigue, there was an immense amount of work to be got through that night; I don't know how many times I put my signature to papers handed me by Mr. Smith, but it seemed millions.

I had sent a telegram to my mother, just a few words, saying that all was well.

At Mr. Smith's suggestion, I had invited some twenty or thirty people to take supper with me, and at eleven o'clock I vowed that I would work no more. At which Mr. Smith and Baron Sluben laughed, and said that they had been wondering when I meant to stop; and only then did I realise that it had been my place to call a halt, not theirs.

Twice, during these hours of writing, I had been obliged to leave the room, and show myself to the people who stood outside the Palace gates, cheering continuously; but, as it grew towards midnight, the crowd had dwindled, and I could feel more at rest.

I think my first supper-party was a success, the late King's chef being one of the best in Europe.

Naturally enough, high spirits reigned supreme, as one and all there, with the single exception of myself, had worked for years for what had happened this day.

The guests were all very great people in the realm; and, when supper was finished, we withdrew to another room to hold a Council of War, to decide what should be done with Prince Alexis and his following.

There were some whose advice was distinctly Machiavellian, desiring to stamp out all of Ivan's race. They had forgotten, perhaps, that I was related to him. There were others, who thought that imprisonment for life was the thing; while the majority, of which I was one, held in favour of exile.

That was for Alexis and his chief advisers; the minor characters would have to live on their estates, under certain conditions, or leave the country, the choice to be theirs. And so, after a somewhat lengthy debate, it was decided.

Perhaps we were too lenient, knowing as we did the kind of men with whom we dealt; but severity was abhorrent to me who had been so short a while King.

It was long past midnight when I went to my room to sleep; and even then I

did not go direct, for I was obliged to pass the door of the room where Ivan's body lay. A trooper of my body-guard had been placed on guard there, and I stopped to say a word to him; as I did so, the sound of weeping reached my ears.

I looked inquiringly at Mr. Smith, who accompanied me.

"It is Ivan's wife, your Majesty."

"Alone," I asked, "and at this hour?"

The guard answered that she had been within for some two hours, by herself.

"I would speak to her, Count; do not wait, you need repose. Goodnight."

He looked at me for a moment, and then bowed.

"Good night, your Majesty," he said and left me.

I do not know what impulse urged me to push the door quietly open, and enter; not curiosity, God knows. I think it was just the desire to try and comfort this poor lady.

She was kneeling beside the bed on which the body lay, a fragile figure in black, her head buried in her arms, sobbing as though indeed her heart was broken.

As I approached, she raised her tear-stained face to mine; and I saw that it was still comely, though haggard and weary.

"Who are you?" she said quietly.

"A friend of your Majesty's," I answered.

"Majesty, I never was that, since my husband was never really the King."

"Nevertheless, madame, if you will permit, I will address you so; for you, by your acts, have proved yourself a Queen."

She had risen to her feet, and stood looking at me intently.

"Are you the King?" she asked.

"So people have acclaimed me to-day, madame."

"Could you not leave me to my grief, in the midst of your joy?"

"God forbid that I should intrude, madame, on grief such as yours, were it not for the great desire I have to aid, and if possible comfort you; but see," I drew a curtain on one side, making the light of early dawn visible to her, "the night is nearly spent." I dropped the curtain again. "Your Majesty, will you not permit me to escort you to your room, or call one of your ladies, for, next to God, surely one of your own sex could best comfort you?"

"God," she said, "do you believe then in God?"

"Surely, madame."

"Is that why you came in to me here?"

"I had not thought of it, but probably it was His doing, for I think that all kind thoughts are His, and all the pity within me woke at the sound of your weeping."

"Then may He be praised," she said, "that Rudarlia will once more have a

merciful King."

"You love Rudarlia, madame?"

"Ah yes, so much, perhaps my sorrow to-night is more self-pity at thought of leaving than sorrow for my dead husband, for I had wept all my tears for him years ago." She spoke with a little dry huskiness that sounded strangely pathetic.

"Leave Rudarlia, that would be your wish, would it not, to return to your own country, away from sorrowful sights and remembrances?"

There was tragedy in her reply:

"My own country, where is it? My father is dead. I had no friends before I married, I was too young; and the few of my countryfolk who accompanied, and remained with me, are gone."

"Then, madame, remain here, where you will be always an honoured guest. The people love you, I know; and you can devote your time happily to whatever you desire, without hindrance. It shall be my pleasure to see that everything you may wish for shall be yours, and I shall hope to have gained a friend."

"Your Majesty," she said, "what can I say, how can I accept, how can I?"

"By saying, madame, that you will stay. It will be our part, after that, to show you that Rudarlia remembers those who loved her, even in the midst of their own unhappiness."

"Oh, how can I?" I heard her murmur, "how can I, I, the wife of the usurper?"

"Madame, your husband's sins must be answered for by himself; you, however, have never been associated with him in the minds of the people. Only by your goodness, kindness, and charity, are you judged by them; even my mother, who has, God knows, suffered greatly at Ivan's hands, will never think of you except with loving thoughts, as one who was sinned against. I can answer for her, as justice has been ever dear to her. Come, madame, decide as we wish it, and let me see you smile at thoughts of happiness to be."

She looked up at me, and I saw her bravely struggling with her tears.

"May God bless you, as you deserve; I will do as you will."

"That is right, madame, and now permit me."

I raised her hand, and pressed it to my lips; and, retaining it in mine, led her gently from the room, back to her own apartments, where her ladies were waiting.

CHAPTER VIII

That night, for the first time in my life that I can remember, I dreamt of my father. Presumably, the excitement of the day had affected my nerves; but this dream was so vivid, that I can recall it even now: I seemed to be in a vast, ruined cathedral, walking round and round, seeking some means of egress; and, finding none, sat down on the bottom step of the stairway which led to the top of a frightfully high tower.

I felt unutterably despondent, for I knew that outside everything I wanted was awaiting me, and yet I could not name any one thing.

Then I saw some one near me, and I called to him to ask his assistance in escaping; he did not answer, but just pointed up the stairway. So I started to ascend; it was weary work, as the steps appeared never to end, and I toiled laboriously up, up, ever up. Once I despaired and started to descend, but there stood my father pointing and smiling, so I turned again and resumed my interrupted ascent. I was just about to relinquish it for good, when I woke.

It appears strange to me now, when thinking of it, that my father never said a word to explain, and that all my effort apparently led nowhere.

It was Bauen's entrance that had awakened me; and in a very short time I had dressed, breakfasted, and was once more ready for work.

I found Mr. Smith in the great study, where the evening before I had signed so many papers; as we were alone we chatted in a friendly way, for I don't think ceremony was to the liking of either of us.

"Well, Prince," I said, "the first thing I wish is for you to have the necessary papers made out confirming you in that title."

"It can wait, Victor."

"Not a day, I wish it done at once."

"Very well," he replied, laughing.

"And now, I suppose, I have to incur danger of writer's cramp, eh?"

"For a good many days to come, I am afraid."

"You know I saw Ivan's wife last night?"

"Yes."

"Well, she wanted, or rather she did not want to leave Rudarlia, so I asked her to stay. Of course, her financial affairs will be my concern privately."

"I thought you would."

"Are you against it?"

"No. I think she is a good woman, and her life has been very miserable."

He smiled slightly.

"How have I amused you?"

"Because I knew last night, when you left me, that it was to comfort her. Victor, my boy, you must not allow your pity to sway you always. In this case it is all right, but many times it is a fault, in a king. People attribute it to weakness,

unfortunately."

"Very well, I must remember, but I do so hate to see misery."

"I know you do, Victor, but you must always think of the cause and effect, especially the effect your attitude towards it may have. It is difficult to be a good king and also follow the doctrines of Christ, for His teaching was more for the individual life than for the king of a nation, the people of which do not themselves follow His doctrines strictly."

"True," I agreed. "It seems to be almost impracticable in the present state of the world."

"And the longer you live, the more convinced you will be that the Gospel which has it that He said, 'I come not to bring peace, but a sword,' is nearer the mark."

"Then must I be severe?"

"No, but just. That is the greatest of all things, and will lead to the greatest good of the people; not the greatest good of the greatest number, for that is a doctrine I do not hold with."

"How so?" I said, for this remark had surprised me.

"For this reason: the greatest good of the greatest number necessitates the sacrifice of the few; now it is my opinion that the minority are of the most good to a state, for as a rule it is comprised of the more intellectual, artistic, and finer grades of mind. These people are the natural leaders; and, if by legislation you injure that minority, you do harm in the long run to the majority, for the great mass look to the few for ideals. Mind you, I do not deny that, in some cases, injustice is done by, and for the few, but those cases are, or ought to be, judged by a different scale of values."

"Give me an instance."

"An instance? Well, look at England. By taxing the upper classes, enough money is raised to miseducate the masses. The result is that those professions which depend more or less upon education are lowered, vulgarised, by the demand of vulgar minds.

"Literature, which should be one of the great uplifting influences, is becoming every day more and more adapted to the commoner mind, under the name of progress. Progress it is, but in the wrong direction, for it serves to bring all to a dead level of mediocrity; and I maintain that a few lofty minds, leaders in the world of thought, are infinitely more prolific of true progress than smart mediocrity."

I had paused in my writing to listen to my companion, for I had never heard him in this vein before; but his arguments needed thought, and I told him so.

"Thought! why, of course they do. Think over them whenever you can; and, in thinking, apply the principle to all different cases."

"I will; but just now I could not think clearly, for I fancy I hear sounds that indicate more cheering crowds outside."

"A sound that Ivan never heard," said Mr. Smith.

"And which reminds me, that I wish to see Prince Alexis before he leaves for the frontier."

"You will not, I hope, delay his departure," said my companion slyly.

"On the contrary, I shall expedite it."

"You wish to see him alone?"

"If you please, when I have finished these," and I touched the papers before me. "But I wish to know what you think of this scheme of mine. There are, I have heard, a number of poor wretches in prison for non-payment of taxes. I propose to release them at once, and if possible to place them back upon the land. To do this, it will be necessary to dispossess a number of people who bought the various farms for little over the sum wanted to pay the taxes.

"Now these people took advantage of Ivan's overtaxation to invest their money in property, which to my mind was not the State's to sell. Therefore, they made a bad bargain; but, as I wish to be just, I propose paying them the purchase money, plus five per cent., plus a fair amount for any improvements. That is my idea. What do you think of it?"

Mr. Smith thought for some time.

"I see exactly what you wish, but there are difficulties, very great difficulties. To begin with, you would have to create a number of officials to deal with each claim separately, which is bad, for anything that leads to a bureaucracy is pernicious in a monarchy; besides which, you will make enemies of the men you dispossess. Again, it will be necessary to sift to the bottom the reasons there were for the taxes not having been paid. It might also encourage the recipients of your favour to object to all taxation, whether just or not."

"Your reasons may be sound," I said, "but I will try to upset them. First, you object to the creation of an army of officials. Now that is an extreme argument, I think, for there are records in each district of sales of land, and these can be seen with little trouble. I proposed offering a little extra payment to the permanent officials in each district, and doing the business gradually. To my mind, it is necessary to know much more about the land and its productive qualities than we do, for I have read reports dealing with the subject; so a few extra men would not be amiss to inquire into our whole system of agriculture.

"Secondly, you contend that I shall make enemies. I do not agree; these people will get back more than they paid, for something which was distinctly in the nature of a gamble. Those are the two most important reasons against; the other involves too much human nature for me to argue about until I have more knowledge of Rudarlians."

"We are a Parliament in ourselves, Victor, and your answers need leisure for contemplation. However, I see you have finished, so I will give orders for Prince Alexis to be brought to you."

"Thank you, Prince; don't forget about your title. I have just thought of a new rôle for you: Prince von Zeula, Bear-leader to the King."

"It is a title that does me honour," he said, and smilingly withdrew.

Colonel Woolgast ushered in Prince Alexis, and stood as though he expected to have to re-escort the prisoner.

"I will ring, Colonel," I said, touching a small silver bell upon my desk, "if you will remain within hearing."

He cast an anxious glance at me; and the next moment I was alone with the man to whom my coming must have been a terrible blow.

"There is a chair behind you, Prince," I said.

With extreme sullenness he took the seat indicated.

My impression of the man did not improve with further acquaintance.

For some little time we looked at each other in silence, he with looks full of hatred and malicious curiosity, while I was quite frankly interested in him. I wondered how anyone could, by vice, so debase himself, until his very being radiated nauseating vibrations; more especially as he had thought one day to be a king, a person set on a pinnacle for all to see, a leader and chief among men.

I found that, whenever his eyes met mine they turned aside, cold and crafty.

"Prince," I said, "to you, no doubt, I am a very pernicious being, most probably you loathe me with all your heart. You think that I have cheated you out of a throne, yet consider a moment, and you must see that it is not so. Ivan was never King, since I was alive; you were never the heir. I presume you will not deny that?"

"I do deny it. You are an impostor, I know it."

"I am the King."

"By might, not right."

"By both, Prince: by right, on account of my birth which has been proved without shadow of doubt; by might, because the people of Rudarlia loved my father as much as they detested Ivan."

"Your proofs, what proofs have you?"

"That is the business of those who have them in their possession," I replied.

"They will not satisfy me, however."

"What would? Rudarlia? You would not be King for a month; people do not talk kindly of you, Prince, they liken you to Ivan, in your ways of life."

"What are my ways of life to you?"

"Nothing, you have to answer for them yourself; but, if you had succeeded in gaining the throne, they would have meant much, not only to me but to all

Rudarlians."

"You mean?"

"That there is only a certain amount of juice to be obtained from any orange; Ivan sucked this one dry."

"Dry? not so dry that I could not have obtained more from it."

"I doubt if you could have obtained a penny. The people are ruined, absolutely. You would not have dared to tax the nobles, for you would have made enemies of Ivan's friends."

"Well, I am in your power, Impostor; what do you intend?"

"You are in my power, you and your friends," I repeated this slowly and emphatically, for I had seen a look in his eyes that I did not like, the look of one who stores up malice for the future. "I do not think you would be regretted, whatever I decided to do, even by your friends in Bornia, for instance."

He leant forward in his chair, and lowered his voice.

"See," he said, "let us understand each other. I know that you are an impostor, just a pawn in Zeula's game. I know you for the Englishman who wounded Goltz; so why keep up the farce? You will have to remain King, of course, but there will be rare pickings. Now, I can help you if you consent to work with me. This is what I propose: you must insist on my having a good pension, and my debts paid. I, on my part, will keep mum about you, and accept you as my sovereign; I never wanted to be King, but I want the money badly. Who the devil would want to live in Karena? Not I for one.

"Another thing, I will give you some ideas for putting on the screw; a friend of mine and I have worked out several ways, while awaiting Ivan's death. What do you say?"

I was too sick mentally to answer him, the callousness of his proposition had almost numbed me. I was an impostor to him, and yet he would sell what he fancied to be his birthright, for a pension and payment of his debts.

I groaned inwardly at what would have happened to Rudarlia under his rule, and yet I was inclined to let him unburden himself of these schemes of taxation. I fancy that my mind was fascinated by the loathsomeness of his, almost like a rabbit in the presence of a snake. I wished, however, to hear more, so, feigning an interest which disgusted me, I pretended to think over what he had said; and then I too leaned forward in my chair.

"You have interested me," I said, "in spite of your affirming that I am an impostor; but you must let me know more of your ideas. That is essential, for you will not wish me to speak to and consult Zeula, will you?"

I saw his evil face light up, and I read his thought: that I was willing to be his tool.

"Is it likely that I should tell you, without security?" he asked, with a twisted

kind of smile.

"Why not? Your ideas would be no use to me without your aid; if I played you false, you could always expose me, couldn't you? For, mind you, it will be a dangerous game to play, Zeula is no fool."

"Bah!" he snapped his fingers, "that for Zeula. He must do what we want; he dare not let me expose the game, I have too much power."

"Of course," I said, and wondered what this power could be. "And yet, until I know how to raise the money, I don't see how I can act."

He pondered a moment, and then with an oath, burst out:

"Very well then, I will tell you, but, by God, if you play me false!--but there, you dare not. Now listen. You and I must make enough in ten years to satisfy us, as after that things will be different, for this reason: Bornia."

"What has Bornia to do with it?"

"Everything. I am much in request at the Court." He chuckled. "King George has four daughters, and none of them married yet." He looked at me with a leer.

"Go on," I said, "tell me the plan."

"All in good time, Impostor, all in good time. Bornia wishes very much to own Rudarlia."

"What?"

"Strange, isn't it? Nevertheless a fact, and they want it without fighting. That is where we come in. Every time an official dies or vacates his post, you will fill it with one of my friends--they will be naturalised, of course, to avoid detection--for each post so filled, Bornia will pay. Do you see?"

"Yes, yes, go on."

"We will work it, so that in ten years' time Rudarlia will be full of Bornians, even the army. Then what I should have done, and what you will have to do, is to abdicate. Our officials will at once invite King George to occupy the throne. There, that is the big scheme. Now for another. You did not know, perhaps, that there were minerals in this country? There are, but not in paying quantities, on Royal land too. We will get some expert to boom the thing up to the skies; the nobles and shopkeepers will invest, unwisely but well for us, eh?"

"Have you any more schemes?"

"That will do to commence with, Impostor; when we have things fixed up, I'll tell you more."

"Have you more as good as the ones you have told me?"

"Oh, plenty. Well, what do you say?"

"What do I say?" cried I, my temper getting the better of me. "I say that you are the biggest cur unhung, that you have the vilest mind that ever man possessed, and that I feel disgusted with myself for ever having even spoken to you. You low brute, listen to me. I am not an impostor, whatever you may think; I am the son

of Merlin I. Hold your tongue, or I'll forget that I am the King--silence, I say. I had proposed to pay your debts, to give you a pension, as you did no harm yesterday, but now I tell you that not one penny do you get from me, you cur."

I was standing over him; and he shrank back into his chair, his coward lips quivering with fear.

"Your Majesty," he quavered.

"'Impostor' you called me a moment ago; you have changed quickly."

"I did not mean it, your Majesty."

"Good God! Haven't you one redeeming feature, are you such a coward too?"

He did not answer but looked at me imploringly.

"You need not be afraid, I won't touch you. I hoped you would have one manly attribute, but it appears you are absolutely despicable; you are so low in all your thoughts that I almost pity you. Is there any way in which you could be helped to realise what a vile thing you are, I wonder--I suppose not?"

He still sat white-faced and quivering, and made no answer. As I looked at him, I felt my loathing and disgust turn almost to compassion--he was so hopeless, so contemptible. My anger, too, had passed.

"How much do you owe?" I said.

"Eh?"

"How much do your debts amount to?"

The crafty look returned to his face, and with it a faint expression of hope.

"My debts?"

"Yes, how much would cover them?"

"I don't quite know."

"You know perfectly, tell me at once."

"At least thirty thousand pounds. It is the Jews--it was fear of them that made me think of the plans I suggested to your Majesty."

"You need not lie to me."

"It's true," he said eagerly. "They were pressing me hard, and I had to plot and scheme to raise the money."

"And you thought that Rudarlia was yours to barter?"

"I could think of no other way, and I knew that Ivan had had his share."

"So you imagined you could finish her ruin. My God! how low you are. I suppose the thought of trying to put her on her feet again never entered your head."

"I was to marry one of George's daughters, and then, of course, I should have done what I could."

"She is well out of it; for I presume that, now, you will no longer be a desirable match?"

"I suppose not."

Again I caught a crafty gleam in his eye.

"Prince Alexis," I said, "listen to me, you have a little, very little, of the same blood as mine; for that reason alone, I intend to pay your debts to the amount of thirty thousand, no more. Had you shown one spark of feeling for Rudarlia, I should have given you a pension. As it is, I shall not; but, that you may have a clean start, I will give you another thirty thousand in addition. Take my advice and invest it; try and live decently and honourably."

He would have taken my hand in the extravagance of his joy; but I avoided it. It was one thing to give alms to a blood relation, but another to take the hand of a vile cur such as he was.

I wrote then and there a cheque for the promised amount, and handed it to him.

"You may refer your Semitic friends to me. The sum of thirty thousand will not be increased by a penny."

"And am I free to go when I will?" he asked.

"You will be escorted to the frontier, and will remain on the other side. Should you return under any circumstances, you will meet with different treatment."

I rang the bell, and Colonel Woolgast appeared.

"You will conduct Prince Alexis to his room, Colonel, and return to me as soon as possible."

I sat staring from the window waiting for his return. I was uncertain, in my mind, about the wisdom of the course I had adopted with Alexis.

He was capable of any villainy, any crime, but I had given him the money with an object; I wished to gain time. It ought to last him for a year or eighteen months; and much could be done between now and then.

I had had suspicions before that Bornia had covetous designs with regard to Rudarlia.

Well, we would see. Thank God, my stepfather had made it possible for me to do much, without fresh taxation.

I was just thinking of the degraded spectacle Prince Alexis was, almost ashamed of myself for having allowed him even to suggest the things he had, when I heard a woman's voice raised in altercation with the guardsman outside the door. To my amazement she spoke in English.

"I want to see His Majesty, I tell you."

I heard the sentry explain, in Rudarlian, that it was impossible for her to have audience with me.

The next moment the door was flung open and in flew the owner of the voice. The sentry had evidently been fooled by a pretended retreat; and had

grasped a portion of her gown as she dashed past him. Zip! something had given way.

"Fancy treating a lady like that; it's a shame!"

It was as much as I could do to keep my face straight, as I signed to the sentry to close the door.

The "lady" was examining the back part of her skirt with an angry expression on her face, taking no notice of me whatever; but having repaired the damage--presumably with pins--she looked round and saw me standing near her.

"Lord, your Majesty!" she cried, dropping on her knees.

"You wished to speak to me, I believe."

"Yes, please your Majesty."

"Then supposing you take this seat, you will find it more comfortable than the ground, I daresay."

"Thanks, your Majesty."

"Now tell me what it is I can do for you. I only have a very few minutes to spare."

She was a remarkably handsome woman, with a splendid figure. I was struck, too, by her pleasant smile.

"It's like this, you know, the late King took a fancy to me, and induced me to come here to Karena."

"Wait a moment. To begin with, who are you, and where do you come from?"

"I was in the Polly-Doddy troupe; Eliza de Vere, I call myself. It isn't my real name, but it'll do. His Majesty saw me dancin', and made my acquaintance. After a bit, I came along here, but the first thing I know is that I find myself in a Palace and him lying dead, and I've lost my job with the troupe, and gone dead broke except for the few things I brought along with me. Then I hear as there's a new King, so I think I'll hop along and try to hook him, but I see your Majesty isn't one of that sort, so all I want now is to get away. God knows when I shall get another job, don't suppose I ever shall, for I broke my contract to come here."

She stopped, for want of breath, I imagine.

"Is that all you want?" I asked.

"Yes, thank your Majesty, if you'll give me the fare home I daresay I'll do. I can always get a livin'."

"What would you like best to do?" I asked, for I was sorry for this frank, vulgar, beautiful creature.

"If I had my wish, I'd live in the country. I was born on a farm, and I'd love a little place with chickens and a pig or two; that's what I thought I could get out of the old man, but he's gone."

"And supposing some one gave you that, would you be contented to live in

a quiet, decent way without longing to be in London or some big town?"

"Wouldn't I just? It would be just heaven to get out of it all. You don't know what my life is, or you wouldn't ask."

I suppose I was foolish, but I was heart-sick at the thought of this woman going headlong to the devil, as I have no doubt she would have done. So once more I wrote out a cheque; it was for a big enough sum for her purpose, upon the interest of which she could live, marry possibly, almost certainly, and rear splendid children, for England. I blotted the slip of paper and handed it to her, with some few pieces of gold.

"Now," I said, "when you get to England take this to some bank and explain to them what you want. They will advise you and invest it for you. Don't trust anyone else; personally, I should advise you to keep silent about possessing it. Marry some good man, and be happy, and sometimes say a prayer for the King of Rudarlia."

She took the cheque, and wide-eyed, looked at it.

"Is this for me?" she whispered. "You aren't kiddin' me, don't you want anythin' for it?"

"No; nothing beyond what I have mentioned, a prayer, when you remember it, that is all; and now I must say good-bye and good luck."

She seized my hand and wrung it.

"God bless your Majesty. I'll pray for you night and morning, I will." And then the poor girl burst into tears, sobbing as though her heart would break.

It was at this juncture that Mr. Smith returned.

Still sobbing, "Eliza de Vere" left the room, taking no notice of the indignant sentry.

"Your Majesty has the knack of making friends," Mr. Smith said, with a smile. "Her thanks and blessings were most impressive."

"Poor devil!" I said. "Some of Ivan's beastliness, only with her the worst effect was a broken contract, with the managers of some troupe of dancers."

"And you put matters right immediately?"

"It was easily done."

"How much did it cost, Victor?"

"Nothing compared to a person's happiness."

He shrugged his shoulders, but humorously; and then once more became the stern-faced man.

"And Prince Alexis?" he asked.

"Ah, in his case I have given him enough rope to last him a year or so, at the end of which time I shall be quite happy to hang him."

"Ah!"

"I also paid for knowledge that will be of great value to us; we must take

great care to know everything about all the officials we appoint."

"Ah!"

"It is lucky that I am alive, or within ten years Rudarlia would have been governed by George III of Bornia."

"Ah! so that was the scheme, was it?"

Colonel Woolgast was announced.

"Colonel, I want one of your officers to conduct Prince Alexis over the frontier. He must be one who can hear without hearing, and, speaking, say nothing. Above all he must be devoted to Rudarlia. Have you such a man?"

"Captain von Essens, your Majesty."

"Very well, if you answer for him; I would have asked you to have escorted the Prince, but it would have done him too much honour, to send the Colonel of my Guards, and a General in my army. You will soon have the pleasure of kissing my hand as I promised you."

"I would do it now, your Majesty."

"No, Colonel, we will stick to our arrangement."

"Shall I give Essens the order?"

"If you please, and, Colonel, there may be some officers under you who deserve promotion. Send me in their names, and it shall be seen to, for I have no doubt that there will be vacancies before long in my Guards."

"It shall be done, your Majesty."

CHAPTER IX

The next few weeks were terrible ones for me; days full of anxiety, hard work, and ceremonial. I discovered that a King needs the strength of two men, physically and mentally, in the first few weeks of his reign.

I had dismissed a great number of officials appointed by my predecessor, for they were incompetent men, owing their positions to rank favouritism; and for some time Rudarlia was governed by a provisional Cabinet, composed of the great men of the state.

The hopeless confusion into which Ivan had plunged the finances of the country was appalling.

There had been complete destruction of many valuable assets of wealth, but chiefly the mischief had been done to agriculture, upon which a great part of the

population depended. Taxes had been heaped upon the people; first in the shape of a land tax, which had grown into a ridiculous size; secondly the market tax, a peculiar piece of villainy, since it mulcted both the buyer and the seller. Ivan, evidently, could not be just, even in his injustice, for the poor man, with perhaps a goat for sale, had to pay as much as the large farmer selling whole herds of cattle.

One of my first acts was to abolish this iniquitous imposition altogether; and a very small annual payment for market dues was charged instead.

The money raised in this way was used locally, so that those who paid received it back in the improvements of their locality.

I merely mention this tax as an example of Ivan's financial methods when dealing with agriculture.

Enormous sums, for Rudarlia, had been raised, of which there was no record dealing with their expenditure. Presumably, therefore, they had disappeared into the avaricious maw of Ivan.

When we examined the debit side of our accounts it was almost more appalling.

The army had been paid, not regularly, but in dribblets. As for clothing, ammunition, etc., the stores had been depleted, and nothing had been replaced. The other services had been run in the same way, without method or supervision. The fraud and thieving practised by many of the officials must have been terrific.

It is not my intention to give a long, detailed account of such matters, although they are impressed on my mind.

* * * * *

After the first outbreak of popular enthusiasm, there were recurrent bursts of joyful celebration, and devotion to my family.

As was perhaps only natural, the restoration of the direct line of the Stephanovitch dynasty caused a considerable stir throughout Europe; and the usual diplomatic correspondence took place.

In Sir George Curtiss and Monsieur Delacroix, the British and French Ministers, I found friends. These two men were ever ready to be of service to me personally, and also to Rudarlia. I fancy they understood that my feelings were very strongly in favour of the Triple Entente; and it was most probably those same feelings of mine which caused me to be slightly less friendly with the central European powers, or rather their Ministers.

I had then--and so far have had no reason to change my views--a very strong conviction that Germany was the great danger to the world's peace.

All of them expressed pleasure at having Merlin's son upon the Rudarlian throne. Even the Bornian Minister pretended that he was overjoyed, and ex-

pressed himself to that effect in beautiful, flowery language; verbiage which I accepted smilingly, and at my own idea of its worth.

To me, Bornia was our greatest menace, I had imagined this always; and now, since my conversation with Alexis, I was quite certain of it. So I gave all the time I could spare, from pressing home affairs, to planning out how to get the better of our neighbour in the conflict that I foresaw.

Nothing could be done, however, until some kind of order had been established within the kingdom, the chaotic state of which caused a complete change of government to be necessary.

Up to now, Rudarlia had been an absolute monarchy, the king's power being autocratic; a curious survival of mediæval days, and which for centuries had satisfied Rudarlians; but now a more modern spirit was at work, and there were indications that a representative form of government was desirable. But what kind of constitution would best suit the country? That was the question, and I gave it a great deal of thought, before asking some of the leading men to give me their ideas in writing. These, when I received them, proved rather disappointing, for all of them suffered from the same fault: that of not recognising the whole, as a whole.

I had suggested to Mr. Smith that he should give me his idea, but he requested me to allow him to stand aside for the present. He told me that he would like to know what his King had thought of doing. He was interested to see what Merlin's son would do.

I set to work vigorously, although, I confess, with a great deal of trepidation. A scheme to turn an absolute monarchy into a constitutional one, without injury to the various classes, and without upsetting the national morale, was one from which anyone might shrink.

I did not propose to work out details--that would have taken too much time, as well as being something that could be better done by others--but I did wish to think out the main structure. I therefore compared the different systems of legislature known to the civilised world. I collected information from all sources, in the course of conversations with men of all classes, and I also thought deeply on the nature of the Rudarlian people. This was the most difficult part of the whole problem; for, of all things, national character is the most complex. Along one road, a nation may be steered as easily as a flock of sheep; along another, the first few yards will split it into a hundred conflicting elements.

Rudarlia was mainly an agricultural country, and it has always seemed to me that such are best governed by a system akin to the patriarchal; yet, as a European country, such a system was impossible. Therefore I had to arrange that, although not patriarchal, an element of it should be there, combined with more up-to-date forms.

It was with this in my mind that I considered the possibility of combining the municipal government with the parliamentary, and to that end introduced the Mayors, as the lowest class in the parliamentary pyramid.

In the election of Mayors, every man, barring the mentally deficient, and the habitual criminal, had a vote.

Mayors, however, did not sit in Parliament, their duty being the collection of facts relating to the conditions of life and public affairs in their districts, and the sending of them in to the class above them, the Sheriffs.

Every man who possessed a house, or piece of land, of an annual rental of five pounds, had the right to vote for a Sheriff. If a man possessed more than one house or piece of land, he should be entitled to an extra vote for each house, etc., with this provision: no man should cast more than one vote in any one borough.

For every four thousand votes, there should be one Sheriff; but, in the case of a borough with more than four thousand voters, the odd votes should be cast still for one Sheriff, until such time as the number of voters exceeded six thousand, when another Sheriff should be voted for, in addition.

To these Sheriffs was allotted the power of selecting the actual members of Parliament, the Senators, in the proportion of one Senator to three Sheriffs.

To the latter, fell the duty of condensing the reports of the Mayors, and forwarding them to the Senate; upon these reports, a committee of Senators would frame bills, which would then be sent to the Minister in whose department they were. Of these Ministers, those of Justice, Interior, Agriculture, Education, Public Works and Arts, were elected by the Senate, while the King would appoint the Ministers of War, Finance, and Foreign Affairs; also the Premier, who would be Chancellor, and President of the Council.

The bills framed by the Senators would be duly discussed, and then sent to the Ministers of the different departments; and it was their duty to introduce them to the Cabinet, who would discuss, amend, and finally deliver to the King, for the Royal Assent.

I made the possession of certain immovable property the basis of suffrage; for, to my mind, those men who value the power of voting will be thrifty and hard-working, in order to purchase or rent land, or a house of sufficient value.

Again, men who possess property are not so prone to encourage loose legislation as the wastrels and thriftless; it would therefore encourage those qualities, which are the basis of all national welfare. The possession of a vote should give a man self-respect and dignity; the casting of a vote should be a matter of serious thought, in order that men of undoubted worth might be elected as Sheriffs.

With regard to the election of Mayors, that all men, with the two exceptions I have named, should have the right to vote, was necessary for the pyramidal form of government; for, among those without the qualifications of sufficient

property, there were, no doubt, many who, by their clear reason, sound judgment, and patriotism, could be of service to the state, through the Mayors.

Sheriffs and Mayors would be paid government officials; Senators and Ministers would be unpaid, except in cases of expense incurred in the state service.

I believe that the soundest laws are made by men who give their services to the state.

It has always seemed to me best, that the portfolios of War, and Foreign Affairs, should be in the hands of nobles chosen for their patriotism and probity. Finance, too, should not be a question to be tampered with by lower-class men, for an intellect of the finest understanding, unswerving loyalty to high ideals, and a consummate knowledge of human nature, are essential in one who would conduct worthily the finances, which are undoubtedly the heart's blood of a nation. However great a man may be who has risen from the lower class, it is generally through being possessed of qualities which, admirable though they are, do not lead to the delicate sensitiveness, tact, and polished thought necessary.

Again, in every assembly of men, there are always those in opposition; perhaps it is necessary, to obtain the best legislation. This being so, it were only human nature to promise to the electors those things which might forward their election, regardless of expense, and, once finance becomes a party question, unwise legislation is thrust upon the state, accompanied by an enormous increase in taxation. Personally, I would favour slow and steady development in everything, always reserving, however, sufficient energy to maintain, for some considerable time, high pressure and rapid movement. Therefore, I would sooner see a government of sober-minded, level-headed men than one led and directed by more brilliant and erratic brains, nothing being, to my mind, so injurious as the clever, plausible man, who has the power of swaying an audience by words; for, generally, their speech is mere verbiage, used to conceal their real thoughts and confuse the minds of their hearers.

In order that the finances of the country should not be controlled by one man, the whole Cabinet should discuss every tax suggested by the Minister; and it should be the privilege of the King to call in not more than five Senators to discuss with them.

The Army and Navy should be in the hands of experts, with the same provisions as in dealing with Finance.

Foreign Affairs should be in the hands of the King and Minister; only in cases of serious import, such as the sending of an Ultimatum, or great change in foreign policy, should full debate be allowed in the Cabinet.

That was the rough draft I drew up to show to Mr. Smith. I advised gradual alteration of existing laws; never, however, until better ones were ready to take their place.

In my scheme, the elections should take place every five years. The King, however, could retain the Ministers appointed by himself for as long as he thought fit.

It so happened that my ideas found favour at once with Mr. Smith, and other nobles to whom I showed the draft; and I am glad to say that they have been in existence in Rudarlia now for some years, and I think meet with general approval.

Naturally, they were altered here and there; but the main idea is the same as that embodied in my first rough draft.

I shall never forget the day when a deputation of some of the leading men from all the provinces waited upon me to deliver into my hands a petition, couched in the humblest and most loyal terms, begging me to grant Rudarlia an extremely limited constitution.

We, that is Mr. Smith and the other nobles, had kept to ourselves the plans we had been making, so their petition was looked upon by them as a most daring innovation to propose.

"Indeed!" said I, having glanced at the paper. "Are you not content that I should govern you well, and in accordance with past traditions?"

"It is not your rule, your Majesty, that we fear, it is rather those who may come after you. Your Sacred Father ruled us well and yet Ivan came. As it is, we, your humble servants, recognising in you the true successor to your father's throne, would wish to profit by your graciousness, to ask this great boon, to ensure against possible ills in the future."

"You believe, then, that it is wise to 'Make hay, while the sun shines.' But, tell me, have you plans drawn out, for our consideration, of this proposed constitution?"

"No, your Majesty, that is further than we dared to go."

We had had copies made of the draft which I have referred to, and Mr. Smith at this moment handed one to me. I took this as a sign that he would consider it wise to divulge our secret now; so I handed the draft to the leader of the deputation and said:

"Gentlemen, although my reign has only just begun, you have approached me with this petition. If you will withdraw and read this paper, I shall be pleased to hear your opinion upon it. When you have considered it, return to me here."

They withdrew, and I returned to my work with Mr. Smith.

In less than an hour, they were back again, with such expressions of delight on their faces that I was well recompensed for any trouble I had taken. I had given them so much more than they had ever dreamed of, that they stood confused and stammering before me.

"Well, gentlemen, you see that, quick as you were with your petition, we

have been still quicker in preparing our answer."

"God bless your Majesty. It is so much more than we dared hope for, that you find us dazed with your generosity."

"Then you are satisfied?"

"Satisfied! More than satisfied, and eternally grateful to your Majesty. Ah! all Rudarlians will rejoice when this becomes known, and every man and woman will be bound even more firmly in their devoted loyalty to you."

"God grant it; but you must realise, and make others understand, that such change takes time to carry out. Therefore try and curb impatience, believing that our best endeavours will always be for Rudarlia."

It took months of hard work by able-minded men to work out the details of our scheme, and as many more to perfect the machinery.

In the meantime, I set to work upon the army, and other matters that were of great importance.

In order to expedite matters, I immediately appointed those Ministers whom I should have the power to appoint under the new constitution.

Mr. Smith, or Prince Zeula, as I shall now call him, was Chancellor, and President of the Council.

On the plea of age, General von Vorkovitch begged to be excused from the War Ministry. He, however, volunteered his services when required, to help with the reorganisation of the entire force, which I was determined to undertake. It was necessary on account of the slackness that had crept in under Ivan's rule.

I appointed Count Belen to the office. He, although not in the army, had a profound acquaintance with the military services of the great nations. Prince Kleber, who was the greatest noble of our maritime province, was given the navy to organise.

In Count von Maark I found a shrewd, able, and consummate financier, yet a most honourable man.

Prince von Venoff was our first Minister of Foreign Affairs. He was a tactful and polished man, with great understanding of foreign nations, and their different characteristics. He had travelled extensively, and made many important friends among the diplomatic bodies of most of the European countries.

I also appointed men recommended by Zeula to fill the posts which would be senatorial in selection: Baron von Casile to the Interior, Count Storfar and Baron von Klintor receiving the portfolios of Justice and Agriculture, respectively.

They were all extremely able men, who were full of eagerness and zeal in the public service.

The scheme I had mentioned to Zeula, with regard to the farmers who had suffered through injustice, was carried out successfully.

I issued an order, granting free pardon to those who had taken to brigandage

through the same reason.

We established small land banks through the country; a very important move, almost a necessity, so dry had Ivan drained it. I advanced the money, and thanked God and my stepfather for the power to do so. Indeed, without my vast fortune, I do not know how we should have managed except by a crippling loan.

In order to encourage the farmers, a small bounty was placed on various food-stuffs; for the quantity of foreign corn imported would have made it impossible for them to have grown it with any profit.

Upon all this imported food we placed a small duty in order to accustom the people to the idea, for it was our intention, once agriculture was on a footing in any way commensurate with the needs of Rudarlia, to increase the duty upon such foodstuffs imported, chiefly for the sake of revenue.

I also encouraged breeding horses and cattle, setting the example by starting stud farms on my own lands.

Every day the Ministers would come to me, and we would spend long hours in discussing ways and means.

With regard to the taxation, Count von Maark and the Cabinet settled the necessary changes; the only tax that I interfered with being the income tax, and that, I insisted, should be levied upon every one, even if only to the extent of one penny in the pound.

There was so much to be done in the interests of the army that at first I was staggered; but, as it was futile to sit and weep, we very soon began to make headway.

I will say one thing for my predecessor, he had kept up the military college founded by my father, and the officers were well trained; but the weapons and stores, alas, were conspicuous by their badness or their absence.

We rearmed the troops; and little by little accumulated supplies of ammunition. We re clothed the men, we built barracks, we instituted government factories for supplying the army and our small navy with necessities.

The only branch that was apparently neglected was the artillery, but that was with an object. There, we only showed four batteries of modern guns, two of field, and two of horse artillery. In reality, we had fifteen of horse, and twenty of field artillery; they were kept secretly.

The four batteries mentioned were used for practice, but we kept the old guns also.

I remember causing Count Belen considerable astonishment when I insisted upon the out-of-date artillery being kept, although we had such splendid modern guns at our command.

"Count," I said, "you know as well as I do that our enemy is Bornia, is it not so?"

"I am afraid she is."

"Personally, I am convinced that before long we shall be forced to fight."

"That is so, your Majesty."

"I do not believe that anything would induce her to stop her preparations, preparations that are being conducted secretly."

"I am afraid that it is extremely unlikely."

"Very well, I am determined that Rudarlia shall be victorious, and I consider it essential that they shall underestimate our forces."

"But why retain the obsolete weapons, your Majesty?"

"Can the men fire with them?"

"Yes, and well, too, considering."

"They will shoot all the better with good guns; as for the obsolete ones, why, I intend some day to make a present of them to Bornia."

"A present?"

"Certainly, and in such a way that they will not fear the gift."

He paused a little and then said:

"I must wait your Majesty's pleasure; I do not understand. But may I ask whether you intend to fortify Karena, Soctia, and other places?"

"It is my intention."

"But your Majesty forgets, perhaps, the size of heavy artillery; how can such pieces enter the country without being detected?"

"Prince Alexis supplied me with the way; I had the will before. You have no doubt heard that there are minerals to be found around Karena, and other places of like importance."

"I have heard of them."

"Good! I have surveyors seeking them now. When they have found them it will be in places of supreme importance from the military point of view."

"Aha!"

"You begin to understand? Well, once these surveyors--and you would doubtless find friends among them--discover these very sensibly placed minerals, mining and other work will be commenced; of course they will not allow inquisitive strangers in, but they will admit enormous pieces of machinery. Again, in order to deceive, we shall make a show of some splendid weapons, I think on the southern forts round Karena."

"And your Majesty's mines will be to the north and west, with perhaps some near Poiska, and Orvlov."

"Exactly, Count!"

"God bless your Majesty," was all he said, but I could see him grinning to himself in huge content.

Apropos of the mines, I had a letter from Alexis as soon as the public knew

of them. It ran something like this:

MY COUSIN,

I hear on excellent authority that you have taken advantage of our little conversation, in regard to the mineral wealth of Rudarlia. I am grateful that one so virtuous as yourself should have profited by my poor brains. Pray remember me when the dividends are paid.

ALEXIS REX.

I did not take the trouble to answer this piece of impertinence, at which I was not surprised; rather, in fact, was I gratified that my estimate of Alexis was so correct. I knew, too, that further letters would come from him, as soon as his money was spent. I hoped that by then Rudarlia would be in a condition that would enable me to give a negative answer to his blackmailing; if not, well, I could afford a few thousands more if it was necessary.

So determined was I to perfect our fighting force, that I engaged a retired English army surgeon to superintend, and place on a proper footing, our army medical corps. This was a branch that had been completely neglected, but now, run on British lines, it became absolutely splendid and our doctors were magnificent.

I laid in a large quantity of medical stores.

Great attention was paid to the transport and commissariat departments; but quietly, so as not to attract attention.

Little by little, our army was approaching along the road to perfection. The troops themselves had always been good, so there was splendid material to work on. They used many cartridges, and their shooting improved enormously, as did their discipline. They were loyal to a man, these Rudarlian troops, always to their country, and gradually to me. I think the good fellows learnt to love me when they saw that nothing was spared to render them more comfortable, and that I, personally, was always ready and anxious to assist them.

I made it a point to inspect one regiment each week after lunching with the officers; that is, of course, unless more urgent affairs detained me. But, whenever I took a meal with the officers, I insisted that no extra expense should be incurred.

Whenever possible we had manoeuvres on a small scale, now in one province, now in another. Upon one occasion, wishing to test the non-coms., I ordered different companies to act as they would if left without officers. The

confusion was so great that it was decided, in future, always to try this in all regiments. It was an order to which the troops took very kindly; I fancy they looked upon it as rather a joke. They made great strides in individuality, however.

I have omitted mention of machine guns, as I never look upon them as artillery, but as adjuncts to rifle fire, and in the case of pom-poms, as cavalry supports.

Our supply of these weapons was in proportion to our needs.

Ten picked officers were sent to France for instruction in aviation.

CHAPTER X

It was indeed a busy time in Rudarlia. Ivan's death seemed to have awakened her. From Melanov to Soctia, from Ruln to the farthest western point of the kingdom, there was bustling activity. What had to be done, was done, and thoroughly. All classes seemed to vie with each other in the efforts they made to bring order out of chaos. Everywhere could be seen the signs of reviving desire to live, and live well. No longer were there dozens of farms unoccupied; instead, they rang with the sounds of work, the voices of children, of men and women, who with cheerful faces went about their daily toil, thankful that the burden had been lifted from their lives.

And in the towns it was the same story.

Now, besides the gigantic tasks of granting a constitution and reorganising the army, the other public services had to be overhauled, especially the railways and roads. By the aid of money, much was done to improve both, and also extend them. As if by magic, roads were made connecting village to village and village to town.

The Minister of War had a word to say about the railways; and more than one military council was called to decide upon the advisability of laying this or that piece of line.

The railways in Rudarlia were state owned. I am not altogether in favour of this, but in our case, I insisted upon all the employes being men who had served their country in a military capacity, and the railroads would thus be in the hands of men who were used to the operations of military movements.

Another reason I had for complying with state ownership was that, in such a country as Rudarlia, depending as it did upon the agriculturists, to a very large

extent, the rate for carrying freight would be controlled by the state; for to my mind such rates should be kept low, and, if a loss is incurred by this, it is better for the state to bear the burden than that the producers should be handicapped, as farmers have already, in most climates, to fight against nature.

It was fortunate for me that I was possessed of a fine constitution, and was physically strong, for the strain was great. I was working from morning until late at night.

My Ministers, older men than I by many years, frankly confessed that they could not keep pace with me. Personally, I fancy that I must have been a little mad, so eaten up was I with the desire to improve Rudarlia, and then still improve. I gloried in the success which our efforts met with.

Mr. Neville, who had brought my mother back to Karena, warned me time and again not to overdo it, but in spite of all his good advice I persisted, and luckily did not break down.

My old tutor was of the greatest service to me. I had given him a suite of rooms in the Palace, and he was ever near me when I wanted him, which was quite often, I am afraid.

Carruthers had returned to England soon after my ascending the throne, but I had promised to send him word before hostilities broke out with Bornia, so that he could get leave and join us. I knew that he would have to dodge the authorities at home, somehow; but I gave him my promise to cable the one word "Now" when I was certain that war was inevitable.

It was now nearly two years since I became King, and so far we had managed to avoid any serious rupture with our neighbour; but that it was near, I was convinced. We had added continually to our stores of every kind. We had a large reserve of ammunition, small arms, and medical stores, as well as a vast quantity of food in the fortified towns.

I think it is permissible to say, with a good deal of pride, that Rudarlia was ready for whatever happened; that is, as far as a nation can be prepared. It depends so much upon what is willed--destiny, or God's will, if it suits you better. Perhaps the terms are synonymous; they were to me. But even if a nation is destined to be overthrown, and swept away, even if the national life must end, the individual element remains, so that every man, be he king or peasant, must profit by straining every particle of energy for his nation and, in so doing, the sacrifice he makes will strengthen himself.

I had heard again from Prince Alexis, a threatening letter, full of cunning malice and blackmail. I sent him a few thousands, for I was not quite ready to refuse him.

It was after this that I took a holiday--one week. Perhaps it was not the kind to appeal to every one, but to me it was a needful change from the routine

of statecraft. I went walking with Mr. Neville. I should think we averaged twenty miles a day.

We walked among the peasants, the farmers, and the workers in the towns. Everywhere we found contentment, and sometimes I blushed to hear the praises heaped upon my head. We were generally taken for a pair of Englishmen on tour. We talked with every one, as on our first visit to Rudarlia. One day we visited Melanov, with two objects: to see Colonel von Quarovitch, and hear news of Piotr. I knew that the former would know me for his King, for he must have seen pictures of me, and heard enough to connect me as King with his visitor, whom he no doubt had thought eccentric, to say the least of it.

As I did not wish the soldiery to know of my arrival, I asked Mr. Neville to prepare him for my visit, so that I could see him alone. I gave him two or three minutes and then went in.

The news of my arrival had evidently come as a great surprise, for he was still seated staring at Mr. Neville when I entered. He sprang to his feet in a second and saluted. I saw his grim old face twitching.

"I have come again, Colonel, as I promised," I said, and held out my hand.

His emotion was so great that for a moment or two I turned away; for the sight of a strong man trying to restrain his emotion is a terrible thing.

I do not think there was the proper ceremony between us; in fact, on second thoughts, I am sure there was not. We were far more like two friends than King and subject. His delight over events was extreme; and when I told him, as a secret, of certain plans, certain fortifications, I really thought he was becoming crazy with joy. He swore like a trooper, then apologised with the grace of a courtier, and swore again.

He laughed gleefully at thoughts of war--I believe fighting was like wine to him--and gave me minute accounts of his expenditure of the money I had left with him. They met the fate I had promised them.

We stayed two hours with him. At the inn, we heard news of Piotr, from the oily host who had introduced him to our notice. It appeared that he was back upon his farm, doing well. So there for the present we left him, undisturbed; but I retained the half of the broken coin which he had given me, and did not forget his promises.

I enjoyed the first six days of that holiday immensely; but, on the seventh, something happened, which I only enjoyed afterwards.

From Melanov we had walked round to Amplech, from where we intended to return to Karena. We did not enter the town, but put up for the night in an inn upon the outskirts, a very respectable place, standing a little off the main road.

The landlord, who looked like a man who never moved from his own yard, showed us our rooms and the dining hall. We took a table standing by itself in

one corner near a window.

I did not observe the other diners; but recollected afterwards that one of them left the room immediately we entered, and I observed that his dinner was uneaten. I thought no more about him. He, however, had remembered something I had almost forgotten.

It was not long after that Mr. Neville and I sought our beds, for we were both tired.

* * * * *

I must be forgiven if I cannot describe my awakening, but my mind refuses to recall my thoughts. I know, however, that I realised that my head ached consumedly, that I was in a different room from the one in which I had gone to sleep, and that my hands and feet were tied.

There was light in the room, and after some little time I turned my head towards it. A man was busy writing at a table. The light fell upon his face, and I began to puzzle myself as to where I had seen it before. Was it in England? No, I could not place it there. In France?--Italy?--Russia? No. I pondered and worried, then like a flash it came to me: Baron von Goltz! My mind seemed to clear, I understood the unpleasantness of my position. I felt the rope cut into my arms as I tried to burst myself free. Some noise I made must have roused the man's attention, for he raised his head and looked at me.

"Ah! awake, I see."

Then, as I made no answer, he carefully blotted the letter he had written, and enclosing it in an envelope placed it in his pocket. He rose from his chair, shook himself, and walked over to the bed on which I was lying. He was laughing to himself, as he stood looking down at me. I met his gaze steadily, until he turned away.

"I trust your Majesty is comfortable," he said.

"Quite, thank you; but it is a devilish bad bed." I would not let the fellow see that I was at all uneasy.

"Good! Anyone can see that you are not of the same breed as Alexis."

"Very distantly, I am glad to say; but you should not sneer at the Prince, even a dog should not snap at the hand that feeds him." I saw him wince at this, so I continued, "I suppose this is the work of your master, isn't it?"

"No, it is entirely my own."

"H'm! it is pretty low, even for you; but may I trouble you for some water? I find my throat rather parched."

"Gad! you are all right, even though you are an Englishman."

He laughed again as he turned away and left the room.

The moment the door was shut, I commenced to wriggle. I thought I felt something loosen; but I was once more rigid as he returned with the desired drink.

"No poison in it, is there?" I asked.

He drank some of the water before putting it to my lips, then with his arm round me he raised me enough to drink. He was quite tender, too, in his movements; and I felt inclined to laugh--the situation had its humours, in spite of its unpleasantness. I drank all the water there was and felt better.

"Well, what do you intend to do with me?"

"Frankly, I don't know; it depends so much on how reasonable you are, and what the plans of Alexis are, and he is a bit uncertain."

"Of course, you know that you will be traced?"

"Not a chance of it, I assure you."

"You will certainly be hanged, Baron Goltz, that is, unless you untie me and let me pass out."

"It is extremely probable, no doubt, after the trouble I had in getting you here. You ought to be worth a great deal to me, for Alexis will not forget who gave him the throne."

"No; I should be careful of knife-thrusts if I were you."

"Your Sacred Majesty does not care for the Prince? Well, I don't blame you, I don't think much of him myself."

"Then why work for him?"

"Who would you have me work for?"

"For me."

"No, thanks, my friend, you have had your pickings for eighteen months or more; now it is our turn."

"You have tied me up rather too tightly for comfort; if you would loosen the ropes a bit I should be obliged."

"Could I lay hands on your Majesty? Oh no!"

"Then go to the devil!" I said.

"After your Majesty."

He continued to look at me for some time, but neither of us spoke. Then again he left the room and again I had a good struggle with the ropes and felt them give a little more.

When, after a few minutes, he returned, he found me in the same position as when he had left me.

"Your Majesty must forgive me, but I am compelled to leave you for a little time; there is a certain letter to be posted which is too valuable to be let out of my hands. My servant will attend you while I am away; he is deaf and dumb, so I do not think you will seduce him, and--oh, by the by, you called me a dog just now, so I will tell you something to console you during my absence. I have discovered

a new source of income to be paid me by Bornia; I have found out that there are minerals in this country of a very valuable nature, and those mines of yours-- Ah! that interests you, does it? Clever chap you are, I suppose it was your idea. It's almost a pity to spoil the scheme, but----" He shrugged his shoulders and turned away. At the door he paused. "I shall not be long gone, be good till I return."

I heard the key turn in the lock. I was alone and made good use of my time, which I knew would be short. I found a knot with my fingers, little by little I worked my elbows free and then my hands; I heaved a great sigh of relief, but I was only just in time. I do not to this day know how I did it, but I could have shouted with joy when it was done.

There were footsteps outside. I put my still bound feet upon the floor and sat up. Then I stood up, holding the ropes which had bound my arms as though they were still tied; my left hand, however, was loose and ready behind my back.

The door opened and a man came in, some one outside relocked the door, and I had a companion. He was a very perfect scoundrel by his appearance. He possessed other deformities, besides being deaf and dumb, a cast in one eye, a vile mouth, and inflamed nose.

We stared at each other for a moment, and then I looked at my feet with an appealing glance. He chuckled, and coming closer bent to see that my feet were still secured.

As he bent, my fist took him under the chin and he went down. The impetus of my blow took me forward and I landed somewhat heavily on top of him. Fearing that the fall would have been heard, I lay still listening; but no one came, so I pulled him towards me and secured the knife in his sash. With it, I cut the rope round my legs, and commenced rubbing them to restore the circulation. Then I searched the fellow and was rewarded by finding a revolver fully loaded in his pocket. It was transferred to mine.

I did not know how long he would remain unconscious, so I bound and gagged him. Then I ran to the window and looked out.

I was on the second floor of a two-storied house, the grey light of dawn just enabling me to see the projecting roof over my head, and the paved courtyard beneath.

I refused to think of Goltz's last remark. All I thought of was how to escape. I might be able to prevent the damage which he threatened then. I gently pulled the bed to the window, stripped off the sheets and tore them in two, lengthways, knotted them together, and I had a rope. I then dragged the still unconscious man to the bed and thrust him under; he was hidden by a blanket which I let hang over the side of the bed. I wished them to suppose that he had aided me to escape. I placed a chair with its back to the door tilted beneath the handle; and threw a hurried glance round and over the desk. All the papers save one seemed of little

importance, the exception was a list of our supposed mines, with certain details of the artillery. I could have shouted with exultation as I placed it in my pocket. Then I fastened my improvised rope to the head of the bed, throwing the other end out of the window, and was just about to clamber over the window-sill--in fact, one leg was already out--when I heard the sound of a horse galloping. I slipped back into the room, and peeped from behind the curtain down into the yard beneath.

The dawn was just breaking as Goltz rode in.

I heard him speaking to some one, a loud laugh came up to me, then I heard him say:

"No, they don't know he is gone. Keep him walking up and down; I shall want him again in twenty minutes or so."

Now this remark upset all my plans, for it meant that my way of escape was cut off: I could not hope to swing on that rope and get past an armed man waiting below. So, instead, I crept under the bed, and lay there upon my back with every nerve on the strain, and with the revolver ready for instant use.

Waiting there was extremely trying; it was lucky that I did not have to wait for long. I had to push my stunned companion further under, as he was in the way; I hoped sincerely that he would not start groaning or struggling, and so give me away.

Some one turned the key in the lock, and tried the handle; then I heard a creaking noise, an oath, the sound of other voices and a crash--the door was open. I could imagine the look of blank astonishment on their faces when they saw the room apparently empty; and for a second there was silence. Then Goltz gave hurried orders, they were to search the roads and neighbourhood, I could not be far distant. There was a clatter of feet descending the stairs. Had they all gone? I almost betrayed myself: just as I was going to lift the blanket to peer out, some one ran to the window and evidently looked out.

"Leave my horse, I will follow in a minute or two."

I saw two feet go past and heard Goltz speaking to himself:

"Curse him, the cunning devil; but wait, my fine fellow, you can't have gone far. I wonder if he searched the drawer----"

Cautiously I peeped out; his back was turned, so, carefully keeping him covered with my revolver, I wriggled from beneath the bed, and stood up. I had not made enough noise to disturb him, and when I asked him quietly to raise his hands above his head he spun round like a flash.

"My God!" he cried.

"No, only your King. Quick, up with them!"

I have never seen a man more surprised; but he recovered very quickly and held his hands up. In one of them was a package of papers. His face had gone white, and his eyes glistened.

"Baron Goltz, you are a very dirty traitor, and as such I am going to shoot you. Have you anything to say?"

I had made up my mind, as he raised his hands, that it was in the interests of Rudarlia that he should die. The knowledge he had gained was of too great importance; and I alone could not hope to keep him prisoner.

"It will be murder, and useless," he said.

"Hardly, but I will risk it, you are too big a scoundrel to go free from here."

"It will be useless," he repeated, "as I have sent to a friend the information you are afraid of my repeating."

This staggered me, I confess, but I thought of the paper in my pocket.

"What information?"

"I sent a list of your mines and artillery, within the hour, to a man in Bornia. I alone can stop them being sent to the King; you have the upper hand of me here, so I will bargain if you like."

"There is and can be no question of bargaining with a traitor like yourself; besides, you never sent the list."

"I sent it when I left you here."

"You sent no list, you forgot to enclose it, it is now in my pocket."

"You lie!" he cried, but I saw an anxious look creep into his eyes.

"I do not lie, look for yourself."

I pulled the paper out and opened it with one hand, taking good care to keep him covered.

He snarled like a wild beast and flung himself upon me.

I shot him through the brain, it was the only thing to be done.

I often wonder whether I should have been able to shoot him, had he not attacked me.

I took the package from his hands, slipped it into my pocket, and walked out.

I confess that I was trembling, for I had killed a man; and the experience was not to my liking, although it was good work having killed a traitor.

I crept cautiously down the stairs, the house seemed empty, but Goltz's horse was tied to the door-knocker. He shied a little as I approached to unfasten him, perhaps it was the blood upon my coat; and I remember that the knocker on the door sounded horrible, for as far as I knew there was only the dead man and his stunned accomplice in the place.

I mounted, and rode to the door of the courtyard: to right and left ran a broad road. I did not know which way to turn, until I remembered that Goltz had come from the right, so Amplech must lie in that direction. Accordingly, I rode hard for some five minutes. Then a shout made me look round; two men were running towards me, they took me for Goltz, perhaps. I did not wait to undeceive

them.

A mile or so farther on I began to feel a little dizzy, and dismounted to get a drink of water from a brook that gurgled by the side of the road. Near by the road curved, and as I knelt down a troop of horsemen swept round the corner. They were cavalry, and at their head rode Woolgast.

I burst into a fit of laughter, it must have been rather hysterical, and the next moment his arms were round me and the taste of raw brandy between my lips.

The troops were thunder-struck at sight of me, and I saw some of them feeling their swords, as though they hoped that they would soon be called upon to use them. The brandy worked wonders, and I said to Woolgast:

"General, there is a house a little way in that direction, with a light in the second story. Search the house, you will find a man dead there and one stunned beneath a bed; secure him and all papers to be found there. A few minutes ago, there were armed men searching for me, somewhere along the road; capture them, dead or alive."

He gave the orders, and the troops trotted past with many an anxious glance in my direction.

Woolgast, with two troopers, remained behind. He looked at me inquiringly.

"Your Majesty can ride?"

"Of course; I am all right now, if you will give me my horse."

The animal had strayed a little down the road. The trooper went to bring him back, and it was at that moment that Woolgast noticed blood upon his glove.

"My God!"

"It is not mine," I said, and he heaved a sigh of relief.

"What were you doing along this road, General?"

"It was reported that Goltz had been seen at Amplech last evening--he had been spying at Zarlton--I thought that I might obtain news of him."

"Goltz is dead, I shot him half an hour ago."

He gave a great cry of astonishment, and would have asked me when, how, and where, had not the etiquette of Court prevented him. So I told him as rapidly as possible what had occurred.

His wrath was wonderful.

"Now," I said when I had finished, "we will ride back, or rather you will, for I wish you to take charge of the papers yourself; there may be some of importance, I do not know. I shall ride on to the *Golden Horn*, and you can report there."

"And these troopers, your Majesty will take them?"

"No, I will ride alone, let them keep silent about this meeting."

There were few people in the streets as I rode through them, and it was with

considerable difficulty that I procured an ostler to take my horse at the inn. He was too sleepy-headed to notice anything awry with me, and I made my way to Mr. Neville's room.

He was evidently still asleep, for I had to knock three times before a drowsy voice asked what I wanted; but, as soon as he recognised my voice, he was wide awake, and the door was opened in a twinkling.

"What is it, Victor? My God, what has happened?"

I pushed him into the room and closed the door. Then when he was in his bed again, I sat on the foot of it, and related what had happened to me in those few hours, since we had said good night.

I had barely finished, or rather Mr. Neville had not ceased his fire of questions, when Woolgast rode up to the inn with his escort.

Even now, when I recall the host's face as he ushered the General in, I cannot help smiling. It was the picture of blank and despairing astonishment. The thought that he had had the King under his roof, and had not paid him special attention, appalled him. He did not know that afterwards, when I had time to think, I blessed his thick head; for had he kept watch and guard over me, as he would have done, had he known me, I had never been able to frustrate Goltz.

Luck had been mine all through my life, and it had not deserted me when I needed it. I was grateful.

Woolgast's report was succinct: one man was alive, the other two had shown fight. Enough said. The fellow under the bed was a prisoner. All papers were in his possession. The house was in charge of an officer and half a dozen men.

"You have said nothing to the host, General?"

"Nothing, your Majesty."

"Good! Tell your men to say as little as possible; I do not wish it to become widely known, at any rate at present. You will breakfast with me, and we will ride to Karena afterwards, or, better still, return by train. Your prisoners must be taken to Karena. What officer is there below?"

"Captain von Riech, your Majesty."

"Tell him that I place the two in his charge, they are not to be allowed to speak or see anyone except the jailers. We will breakfast in my room in three-quarters of an hour."

CHAPTER XI

I bathed and dressed myself, constructing in my mind the procedure of Goltz's daring raid upon my person.

He must have gone straight to my bedroom when he left the dining hall, and concealed himself somewhere, most probably beneath the bed. Then having rendered me unconscious, let in his accomplices, and lowered me from the window. Once outside, I could easily have been passed off as a drunken man being taken home. He had pulled my day clothes over my pyjamas.

It was a pity that he was such a scoundrel; for, had he been a decent member of society, he might have risen high in the world--for he was clever and undoubtedly brave.

I felt no qualms at having killed him: he was a grave danger to Rudarlia, and also to myself, so my action had been partly in self-defence. It would have been much more unpleasant if I had had to kill a horse or dog.

Upon arriving at the Palace, I immediately sent for Prince Zeula and Count Belen.

Prince Zeula was the first to enter and embraced me affectionately. I waited for Count Belen before saying anything, as I did not wish to have to repeat the tale oftener than I could help.

They were very greatly dismayed, and the Count was almost purple with indignation, especially when he heard that our forts were known. He calmed down a little, however, when I told him that I did not believe much mischief had been done.

As soon as they had been told everything, we set to work to peruse the documentary evidence. At first, we discovered nothing of any importance, for most of the papers dealt with military matters that were known to all people. Then we found one that caused us to squirm, as it contained much information about our reserves of guns and ammunition. Goltz had evidently been a most successful spy, and we could only hope that he had not sent his report to Bornia. We had nearly come to an end of the papers, when I came across a list of some twenty names of men who had been Ivan's friends; against seven of them had been made a cross and the word "accepted."

"Accepted what?" I said, passing the paper to the Prince.

The next sheet explained it, being a letter from Alexis, giving a brief outline of a plot for my dethronement; attached was a list of the same names with a heading in Prince Alexis's writing: "Ivan's friends, sound them."

The three of us looked at each other in silent dismay. That seven out of twenty should have accepted the proposals, which I may justly call infamous, was appalling; we did not know how many had been approached. It might have been that all would have accepted, and they were men who had been treated with absolute leniency and consideration.

"This is in your hands, Prince; it can be nothing but imprisonment, exile would be inadvisable at the present time."

"There is one thing preferable to imprisonment, your Majesty."

"Perhaps; but we must remember that they may not have been told of the assassination part of the scheme. They may have thought only to overthrow me; perhaps, too, they would not sell Rudarlia."

"It is giving them the benefit of a big doubt."

"I should not if there were any harm likely to come of it; but, if you will give orders to arrest these men simultaneously, I think their teeth will be drawn, and we shall have nothing to fear. In a little time it will not matter."

"And the others on the list, will your Majesty place them under surveillance?"

"No, I think not; for, if they have been approached, they have refused to acquiesce, if not, they will probably know nothing about it."

For a short time, few people knew that I had been abducted, but after a while it became almost public property. It was known, too, that I had shot Goltz, but it was not known that we had discovered evidence of a plot; that was kept from the knowledge of all save a chosen few.

Prince Alexis wrote to me, and ended his letter with a request for five thousand pounds, as a salve to his feelings at the reported death of his friend Baron von Goltz.

He must have had a sense of humour after all, although up to now I had discovered no trace of it.

I replied to this letter, sympathising with him over the loss of his friend, and regretting my inability to do more than pay for his funeral.

I was no longer anxious to fend off his attacks. He could try to do us as much harm as he liked, and, really, the sooner he showed his hand, the better I should be pleased. As far as it was possible to be seen, we were ready; so we sat quietly, and waited.

It was about this time that Prince Zeula first broached the subject of my marriage.

He had lunched or rather breakfasted with me, and we were allowing ourselves an easy half-hour, to digest our food and smoke a cigar.

I had noticed that he was slightly perturbed about something, and that he was formulating some thought in his head. I knew he would only speak when he had his idea firmly fixed, so I waited patiently.

"Victor!"

"Yes?"

"Are you satisfied with your country and countrymen?"

"Intensely."

"Do you think that you have done everything possible to prepare for all eventualities?"

"I sincerely hope so. There are many little things that I do not interfere with, but the main preparations are completed; that is, if you are thinking of our preparations against any Bornian attack. You know that our aeroplanes have arrived in Soctia?"

"I had heard of it."

"You hear of everything. Is there anything that I could tell you that would really surprise you?"

"There is one thing."

"And that is?"

He hesitated a moment and then said:

"I should be very much surprised to hear that you had thought of making your greatest sacrifice for Rudarlia."

Then, I knew what was in his mind, and unconsciously I tried to gain time, so as to put off hearing what I did not wish to hear; until I realised that this was pure cowardice on my part, and said:

"What is that?"

"Marriage."

"Good Lord!"

"Your greatest sacrifice; I call it that because a Royal marriage very often lacks love, and I know that to you it will be a torture, and yet, my boy, it is essential."

"I suppose it is," I said, "but is it imperative to think of it yet?"

"Only in order to fix the idea firmly in your head, to give you time to form your thoughts on the subject, to prepare for what must come. You see, Victor, with your temperament, it is difficult to think of married life run on lines of convenience. You must forgo romance, and fill its place, as best you may, with the knowledge that you are sacrificing your personal feelings for the good of the state."

"I will think of it; I suppose it must be into some reigning family?"

"If possible, but at least Royal."

I walked to the window and looked out; but I don't think I saw much, my mind being occupied with the recollection of a slim girlish figure with a bandaged ankle.

I say recollection, for, to confess the truth, I had forgotten that charming riverside idyll. It was strange; at the time, I could have sworn that I loved that pretty little girl; and yet it was not more than two years and she had gone, with the exception of a pleasant memory.

I had excuses to offer to myself; I had been a boy when it had occurred, and since I had become a man and a King. As such I had made a constitution,

reorganised an army, and killed a traitor; all useful things in their way, as well as a thousand other duties which make a king's lot a heavy one.

Ah well! and so I was to marry some one, I must marry some one, for the sake of Rudarlia. It was a case of duty, duty which prevents a king enjoying personal liberty. Even in a matter such as marriage, he must bow his head and do as some one else wills, as cheerfully as his character will allow.

I wonder how many of my subjects realise just what it means to be their King. To live in a beautiful palace, with beautiful food and clothes, horses, motor-cars, an army of servants; surrounded by Courtiers and Ministers. It is a pretty picture, an alluring prospect, to the poor man who only hears that side of it. But, if they knew the infinite boredom to be derived from too many servants, Courtiers, too much food and Palace, if they understood the wearying routine, the never-ending etiquette, the fettering of wish and will, I fancy that their opinions would change. A king, however, should be king, and his example should be that of the head of the state. It is to him that people should look, it is he who should be a light for his people to follow along the roads of devotion, loyalty, honour, and duty.

Yet what a position of difficulties it is, and how much depends on the choice a king makes. I had made up my mind to regulate my life to moderation; for that, it seems to me, is the safest course. Let a king be over-powerful, it is almost certain that he will injure his country by trying to do those things which are more than any one man can attempt. Let a king be weak, he will fail through being ruled instead of ruling, so that the power which should be his gets into the hands of men who are, perhaps, guided chiefly by self-interest, and the result will be anarchy, chaos, and perhaps the destruction of monarchical rule.

I must have stood by the window for a good twenty minutes, turning things over in my mind, before I turned and looked at Zeula.

"Well," I said, "I am ready, or shall be when the time comes; but remember that, when it does, Rudarlia may have ceased to be a kingdom, who knows?"

"God knows, we are in His hands."

"Amen; but He has given us brains and arms, strong men with brave hearts, and unless He fights against us we will win, I know it."

"We will, but when that day comes, Victor, where will the King be?"

"In his proper place, at the head of his army."

"Is that your proper place? You have no heir."

"Would you have me sit here while my army is in the field?"

"It would be better, much better."

"Then better be d--d!" said I. At which my companion smiled, for I seldom swear. "I will fight with my men, and if I am killed it will be so much the worse for you; because Rudarlia will become a republic, and you will be the first President."

"We will hope for the best then. You have luck, or Goltz might still be keep-

ing you."

"The luck of having a hard fist and knowing how to use it."

"And a quick brain," he added, "don't forget that. I should never have thought of looking for you under the bed, if I had been Goltz, when I saw the open window and the rope of sheets."

"No, I don't think I should have myself."

I presume that Prince Zeula thought that the seed he had let fall, in regard to my marriage, was sufficient, for he did not mention the subject again for a considerable time. That day, however, it did its work well and quite upset any keen desire for work which I may have had; so after a little while, I went to see my mother, a thing I generally did when perturbed. It is wonderful to me how so many mothers have the gift of being able to understand and console, without allowing it to be seen.

Now, for the next three months or so nothing occurred to disturb our peace, and Rudarlia showed signs of awakening prosperity. Nature had been kind to the agriculturists for once, and money began to circulate more freely; therefore we felt more at ease in giving time to the improvement of existing conditions of life.

At the end of that time I heard again from Prince Alexis. I answered him curtly to the effect that any further communications would be returned unopened, and almost immediately our relations with Bornia altered; up to now they had been those of smiling, courteous dislike.

I hastened my plans in one thing only: the purchasing of an armoured cruiser just completed by an English firm, for one of the South American Republics, and a torpedo-boat destroyer.

These two vessels were a gift from me to Rudarlia; and I thought Prince Kleber would burst with delight when I told him of my intentions. He had made the most of our naval forces, which until then had consisted of three coast defence vessels, an obsolete ironclad, and three torpedo-boats. When he had these two additional ships, I believe he would have cheerfully tried to tackle the British fleet.

The cruiser was named the *Soctia*, much to the gratification of that province.

Personally I did not fear an attack by sea, the town of Soctia, our one port of any importance, being too well fortified.

About now, was finished the installation of the "Wireless" telegraph system, which linked up all our garrison towns.

Then, one eventful day, came the tidings that Bornia was mobilising, ostensibly for manoeuvres. A reasonable enough thing; but there was no need to send so many troops to our frontiers, there was no need to keep matters so secret, and there was no need to issue ball cartridges. Our Secret Service kept us well informed on most points.

I sent the promised word to Carruthers.

Mr. Neville took a broken coin to Piotr.

Quarovitch was commanded to Karena.

Carruthers answered immediately, in a manner at once laconic and wanting in proper respect:

"Coming, good old Splosh."

Quarovitch was to hand.

Piotr accompanied Mr. Neville. He had no idea that the English lord was his King.

My old tutor told me, when he came to announce his arrival, that Piotr had been in the middle of some farm work, but upon catching sight of the broken coin had run to his house, seized his revolver and a few necessities, and fairly tired his companion with the haste of his movements. Mr. Neville had not explained anything, but had given him the token, and told him that I was in need of him.

He chuckled as he told me that Piotr was all impatience to kill some one for my sake.

Asking Mr. Neville to fetch him, I also sent word for Colonel von Quarovitch to be admitted in half an hour's time. Then I slipped behind a curtain and waited.

I saw Piotr enter the room with a puzzled expression on his face, which grew more intense when he discovered it to be apparently empty. He toyed with his revolver and the hilt of his dagger, stood first on one leg, then on the other, and looked generally uncomfortable. So, to end it, I stepped out into view.

"Well, Piotr, you see I have not forgotten your promise to help me out of a difficulty." I held out my hand.

"I am grateful to your Excellency for remembering, and am truly pleased to see you again."

"You are astonished, perhaps, to see me here?"

"I am, Excellency, but His Majesty was brought up in your country, they say."

"So you think I have been favoured on that account, perhaps."

"Indeed, no; only it may have made His Majesty think of you."

"I am afraid that is not the case, indeed, cannot be the case, for I am a Rudarlian as you are."

"No!"

"Indeed I am, Piotr, and I trust a good one."

"God bless your Excellency, that is good news indeed."

"Tell me, Piotr, are you glad that things have changed in Rudarlia?"

"As is every honest man. I own my farm again now, and am not afraid of the days when the taxes are paid."

"That is good, and those around you, your family, your friends, are they as

contented as yourself?"

"Yes, Excellency."

"And what has become of the other members of your band?"

"They live around my neighbourhood; most of them have small farms, and the others who have not, earn good wages now, and they will soon save enough to buy a piece of land for themselves."

"Splendid! I suppose you still keep the secret of your hiding-place; the other men would not have told of its position?"

"Not a word. They took an oath never to do so, unless I gave them permission, for the place was mine by right of discovery."

"Supposing it was needed for the sake of Rudarlia and that His Majesty said, 'Send for Piotr that I may ask him for permission to use his hiding-place for his country's good.'"

This appeared to tickle him immensely and he roared with laughter.

"If His Majesty asked for it, he should have it for his own sake, Excellency, and my life with it if he wished."

I rang a bell.

"Has Colonel von Quarovitch arrived yet?"

"He awaits your Majesty."

"Tell him I wish to see him now."

Almost before the door had closed, Piotr was on his knees before me.

"Your Majesty, how could I be so blind! I did not think--and yet I should have known. Forgive me my want of respect. My life, everything I have is yours."

"Thank you, Piotr. I am your King, but I would have your devotion, nothing more."

"Your Majesty has that, God knows, and not only mine, but that of every man and woman that I know."

I believe that he would have liked to spend quite a considerable time expatiating on my various merits, had not Quarovitch entered.

"Ah, Colonel," I said, as he saluted, "I wish you to become acquainted with a man you may have heard of. You may even have sought his company. His name is Piotr, and under Ivan's beneficent rule he lived in a way that might have incurred your displeasure. He is now, however, one of my friends."

"I know him by sight, your Majesty, also by reputation. I believe we once exchanged slight courtesies with one another."

Here Piotr grinned.

"I trust neither of you were hurt," I said.

"I don't know about Piotr, your Majesty, but I had an inch of skin taken off my arm."

"And you, Piotr?" I asked.

For answer he lifted the thick hair from the side of his face--part of an ear was missing.

"That I consider highly satisfactory, you both need bear no grudge; neither of you owes the other anything, and you must both have made excellent shooting."

I laughed, and my two companions did likewise, quite heartily.

"And now, Colonel, sit down, and you too, Piotr. I have something of the utmost importance to say to you, and which must be kept absolutely to yourselves. It is this: in all probability we shall be at war with Bornia before the month is out."

A gleam lit up Quarovitch's face. Piotr sat silent.

"You have no doubt heard," I continued, "that Bornia has mobilised for manoeuvres. I have information that they are extremely busy at their arsenals, that ammunition is being hastened to the frontiers--and it is not blank shell. The time has passed when due warning was given before going to war. It is therefore necessary to prepare in peace time. Of course the whole affair may be nothing, or it may be as we surmise: that Bornia thinks that she is strong enough to crush us, and place Prince Alexis on the throne in my place. If that indeed be their plan, some small incident will serve as an excuse for an ultimatum. In any case, if it does not come now, it will in the near future. I think myself, and the Ministers think with me, that they mean war now."

"It were better so, your Majesty, if we are ready too," said Colonel von Quarovitch.

"And what say you, Piotr?"

"That we farmers do not want war, but if it comes we shall know when to fight, and how to fight, but not when to stop fighting, especially when you say they wish to dethrone your Majesty."

"Piotr speaks well," said Quarovitch.

"Good! You in the army will fight, because it is your duty; you of the farms, in self-protection; and both for Rudarlia."

"And the King," said Quarovitch. "Don't forget that, your Majesty; Piotr, here, would not have raised a hand if Ivan had been still reigning; and I should have hated doing so."

"It is lucky you are seldom at Court, Colonel, because I can see that you would forget your soldierly habits for those of the courtier."

"God forbid, your Majesty!" he cried, and then we all three laughed again.

I took a map from my desk, spreading it out before me.

"Come closer, and look. Here is Melanov, Piotr. I wish you to point out to the Colonel the exact spot of which we were talking."

"It is there, your Majesty."

"You see, Colonel, there?"

"I see nothing except that small road which you have traced in red ink."

"You know it?"

"Surely, as I know every inch of the country round, with the exception of one place."

"And that?"

"Where Piotr used to hide himself, that I never could discover."

"He will show it to you, Colonel."

"For a purpose, your Majesty?"

"For a purpose. I wish you to go there, without anyone knowing, and see how best it can be adapted quickly to accommodate at least ten thousand troops, for some days."

"Aha!"

"You will also determine the best way for the said troops to arrive there, and whether it will be possible to remove the traces of their progress. When you have all the information required, return to me here."

"It shall be done, your Majesty."

"You, Piotr, will accompany Colonel von Quarovitch. If help is needed select from your friends the necessary number of men. They will work under the Colonel's directions, and you will be in charge, and will pay them for their time, at twice the ordinary rates. For your own trouble, I promise that you shall be satisfied."

"I want nothing, your Majesty, my life is yours."

"Then return with Colonel von Quarovitch, we shall perhaps need you."

CHAPTER XII

It was three days before Quarovitch returned with the details which I had desired him to obtain. He was in a state of mind bordering upon dismay, that such a place should have existed without his knowledge. He was amazed, disgusted, and yet pleased, for the report he brought back showed that he had a fair inkling of what I intended to do.

Silently we prepared for war, mobilising quietly and quickly, without any undue haste, but with careful attention to details.

I interviewed the Press. Thank God they were all loyal, and were only too pleased to fall in with the scheme I proposed to them: which was to refrain from mentioning any movements of troops, or details of military import. I promised

them that, whenever it was possible, news that they could print should be given to them; they also agreed to write articles, strongly advocating Peace.

As soon as I had Quarovitch's report, I called a Council of War. It was composed of Count von Belen, Prince von Zeula, Prince von Venoff, General von Vorkovitch, Prince Kleber, General Avilinoff, General von Scutane, and Colonel von Quarovitch. Mr. Neville was there to act as secretary, for we wished to keep our plans known to as few people as possible.

I am sure there was a strong current of excitement running through us as we settled ourselves down to examine the large maps of Rudarlia, which were spread on the table.

"Gentlemen," I said, "we all know the strained feeling now existing between this country and our neighbour Bornia; their mobilisation points to serious possibilities, I may say probabilities. I have therefore called this Council to deliberate upon the steps we must take to prepare for war.

"I may tell those of you who are not in the Ministry that we have received information that the great Powers will not interfere in this war--if it should come to war. With this assurance, which as you know is of vast importance, we can rest satisfied. The main issue will therefore rest upon the skill with which we meet the enemy. If our strategy is superior to that of the Bornians, all will be well. I refuse to allow for one moment the idea that it may be inferior, therefore we will not waste time in discussing that eventuality.

"In the Councils we have held in the past, it has been generally concluded that any invasion by Bornia would come from the west, as it did before; and certainly the number of troops massed there point to the probability of the suggestion.

"The military experts among us point out that the Ruln, Agrade, and Karena line is the only possible means of conveying heavy guns to attack our fortified capital, which is most likely the correct opinion; but it must be remembered that there are other ways of reaching Karena. Prince Kleber is the only one who suggests that the attack may be made through Soctia, but I am afraid that there the wish is father to the thought."

"That is so," said the Prince, so glibly that we all smiled.

"That being so, I think we can trust our troops in Soctia to repulse any raid through Garace, which, on account of the nature of the ground to the north, would be of no real import to the general plan of the Bornians, save as the means to create a panic, and draw troops from more important places.

"Now, there is another way into Karena which has not as yet been hinted at as a possible line of attack. All of you, with courteous consideration for my feelings, have refrained from any adverse criticism regarding certain fortified places to the north of Karena. But I have no doubt that you have often considered the

money spent as so much waste; it may be so, but it was spent with the idea of preventing an attack in that direction. The road from Melanov to Karena is the shortest way from Bornian frontiers to our capital."

"Does your Majesty know the road from Melanov to Karena?" asked Vorkovitch.

"Very well, General. I have walked it twice with my eyes open."

"Would your Majesty consider that an attack could be made from there?"

"I trust so, since I have counted upon such an attack being attempted."

"But it would be madness to advance that way, there are no roads to speak of; we could mass our men, so that the enemy would not be able to advance half a dozen miles. The Bornians must know that and they are not mad."

"And yet it is the shortest way to Karena from the frontier."

"It would not be if we were in between."

"Perhaps not; but did you intend being in between? I have not heard the suggestion made."

"No, your Majesty, I did not mention it, as it would be absurd to waste troops in that direction, when the frontier guard would be sufficient."

"Very well, is that the general opinion?"

"It appears to be, your Majesty," said Prince Zeula.

"Are there no dissentients?"

"Three, your Majesty: Count Belen, Colonel von Quarovitch, and myself."

"You agree with me then, Colonel von Quarovitch?"

"I do, your Majesty, and should like to mention that some years ago I sent in a report to that effect. At that time, I am convinced, they could have marched through, that is, if they had taken us by surprise."

"You think then they will try a surprise to the north; on what grounds do you base your supposition?"

"The south and west have been fortified since the last invasion. They know that, therefore it must strike them that they will meet with great opposition in those quarters. This opposition, however, would be tremendously lessened, if not completely upset, by a striking success to the north."

"Then what do you imagine would be their plan of attack?"

"I think, your Majesty, that their main forces will strike along the Ruln-Agrade line, and at the same time they will throw a column through Melanov."

"Pshaw!" said Vorkovitch.

"What is your objection to Colonel von Quarovitch's argument?"

"My chief objection is that he takes the Bornians for fools, and argues on that premise. I maintain that no sane general would try to deliver a main attack through such country as that between Melanov and Karena."

"Colonel von Quarovitch did not suggest a main attack by the north, but a

flying column; personally, I should be inclined to think that they would send a larger force than that."

With the exception of Quarovitch, the military element were against me. It was easy to see that their thoughts ran along preconceived lines of strategy, which I think is rather a failing among military men. It seems to me that they go too much to the great generals of past times, whereas no two battles have ever been exactly similar.

On former occasions, when we had held a Council, the soldiers had agreed most easily, but then we had not discussed the prospect of immediate warfare. Now, when we should all have been eager to find the best possible defence, each of these same Generals wanted his own plan to be adopted.

I listened to each proposition, carefully weighing it; I did not criticise, there was no need, with the other Generals there.

More than once I introduced the subject of Melanov, but each time it met with almost unveiled scorn. So finally I said no more; but I had my own ideas, and I intended to carry them out.

The advance from Ruln was the great topic of discussion, it was there that the opinions differed: one proposed this, another that, until I was weary listening to their wrangling.

Quarovitch said little, being only a Colonel, and I almost regretted not having raised him in rank before this.

The result of this Council was nil. We sat again that evening, also the next morning; and still they argued, and argued.

At this meeting General von Vorkovitch fell ill; he was a very old man, and the strain had proved too much for him. He retired from the Council, and I sent a car to take him to his home near Damretch.

When he had gone I decided to take matters into my own hands, for time was flying, and we were hardly any nearer the solution of our problem. We were receiving reports continually from the border of fresh troops arriving in the neighbourhood of Ruln; it was evident that their main attack would come that way. I had my spies, too, on the Melanov border, but so far nothing was reported save a certain restlessness at Nerane, and certain tracks which could not be accounted for by ordinary traffic. I sent Piotr to try his luck, and see what he could discover.

Now we had decided that the Ruln-Karena line was where our chief fighting must be done, and upon this point General Avilinoff and I agreed. General von Scutane had sided with General von Vorkovitch. They wished to offer a tremendous defence at Ruln itself, even to advance into Bornia, their reasons being that in that way we should be fighting upon the enemy's soil, which is always encouraging to the soldiers. This was not at all what I wished. It was too much like stalemate, that is, granting that we could hold Ruln. It seemed to me that,

even if we could, nothing decisive could result, for we were not in a position to invade Bornia. On the other hand, if we allowed them to force a way slowly into Rudarlia, there would be more chance of victory. With our small army we could wage a defensive campaign, where we could hope for nothing from the offensive. We should be fighting on our own territory, of which we should know every inch; and, as to the morale of our troops, well, I had always understood that men would fight to the death in defence of their own.

It was then decided that our policy should be a slow strategic retreat to our own chosen positions.

We were just about to adjourn for an hour, when an urgent message was brought to me by Woolgast; it ran:

"I have news of the utmost importance to your Majesty, and to the Council now sitting. I await your Majesty's orders.--RUPERT CARRUTHERS."

"Admit him, please," I said, and waited.

There must be something serious afoot, or he would never have been so formal, nor would he have interrupted our Council. He had not wasted much time in coming over, and, perhaps, on his way he had gathered news. I wondered whether he had come through Nerane.

He entered the room and saluted.

I felt inclined to jump up and seize his hand, and laugh with pleasure at sight of him, but of course I could not, so had to content myself with a good look at him. He really was a splendid looking man, the ideal soldier; and it was strange that at that moment I wondered whether he was ever going to be married, and whether there was no Rudarlian girl to tempt him to matrimony.

"Ah, Monsieur Carruthers, you have news, you say, of importance to us. I shall be pleased to hear you."

"I come from Nerane, sir"--it was almost ludicrous to see the start which nearly every one gave, the word "Nerane" seemed to act as a spur--"being desirous of arriving here as soon as possible, I hired a horse and, in trying a short cut, lost my way; in seeking the road again I blundered upon a body of Bornian troops not more than seven miles from Melanov."

"What's that?" I cried, and I saw General von Soutane's hands clench, as they rested on the table. "Bornian troops, sir. I estimated their number to be about ten to fifteen thousand. They are bivouacked in a defile to the east of the road, well hidden from any ordinary passer-by."

"Ah! did you observe any details, monsieur? Had they guns?"

"Only horse artillery, but in Nerane I saw heavier weapons."

"Openly displayed?"

"No, sir, they were hidden in a small farm to the south of the town; observing heavy tracks, I walked up to the house to ask for a drink of water. The guns were covered with masses of hay."

"And what made you suppose them to be guns?"

"At first it was a surmise on my part, as, in England, haystacks are not guarded by armed soldiers. Afterwards I made sure, as one of them was carelessly covered."

I smiled at this, knowing Rupert's inordinate curiosity, and almost superhuman dexterity in ferreting out what he wished to know.

"Was there not considerable risk in walking to the house as you did? Surely it would have been better to have ridden up as any traveller would?"

"I had not my horse then, sir."

"I thought you said you had hired a horse."

"It was at the farm that I obtained my horse, sir."

Rupert allowed a grin to twist his lips, so I said no more about the horse, but I knew there was a story attached to the possession of it. I turned to Avilinoff.

"What do you say now, General?"

"Can Monsieur Carruthers give any reason for supposing that the intentions of these troops were other than pacific?"

"They were carrying ball cartridges, General."

"Then, your Majesty, I say that I was wrong about the north."

"You mean that Colonel von Quarovitch may be right?"

"More than that, I say that he *is* right. They evidently propose a raid; how big, of course it is impossible to say until we know more. Could Monsieur Carruthers give us more details?"

"I had not much time, General, but I saw an aeroplane with the troops, and there were signs of great activity in Nerane. I only got through by pretending to be the nephew of Sir George Curtiss."

We adjourned after this for an hour, Rupert breakfasted with me, and told me the truth about his horse. It appeared that as he was leaving the farm, he met an officer leading his horse; this officer stopped him, and asked his business. Carruthers had calmly knocked him down, placed a thousand franc note in his pocket, and confiscated his horse. The money he had left was what he described as payment for the hire of the animal. He also described the payment as: "A d--d sight more than the beast was worth."

That same day we worked out the full scheme of our south-eastern defence, and I appointed Avilinoff as Commander-in-Chief. The north I reserved. I had made up my mind to conduct that campaign myself. It was perhaps conceited,

idiotic, even criminal, that I, a ridiculously young King, should take into my own hands the leadership of an army, but I had faith in myself, and in my soldiers. I did not presume to pose as a tactician, but the strategy should be mine, for I felt it. Perhaps it was some spark inherited from a soldier ancestor, I do not know.

We had, when fully mobilised, an army of one hundred and thirty thousand men; this number did not include the garrisons of such places as Soctia, Poiska, or Orvlov. It was the actual fighting force that reached that number. Of these I retained forty thousand; the other ninety thousand were under the command of Avilinoff.

Our railways were never idle, and in order to confuse the enemy's spies very few people knew of the ultimate destination of the troops, these being moved backwards and forwards; but gradually they were drafted off to the frontier, or as near to it as Avilinoff wished.

I made Quarovitch a General, for I intended giving him a large command in the north, and he and I worked hard together concocting our plan, and deciding on the composition of the forces necessary to carry it out.

Forty thousand men may have seemed a large proportion of our fighting force to have kept for the north, and I believe it was greatly criticised, but my reasons were these: we did not know how many of the enemy would be opposed to us, I wished to have the numerical superiority over any probable force.

I wanted to gain a victory, of a decisive kind, quickly, and also I thought that, after a victory in the north, the troops, when they did reach the southern army, would leaven that in a most satisfactory way, especially as Avilinoff's army would have been retreating for some time.

For some days small bodies of troops left Karena, after dark, for a destination known only to the officer in charge, and Quarovitch. Of course, I was aware that they went, and where; but, then, I was supposed to know everything.

A shooting affray in which a Bornian officer was wounded, a fishing boat seized by our coast guard, were the two excuses our enemy needed; these two things happened simultaneously, and within twenty-four hours they had presented an ultimatum.

That same night Piotr returned. He had ample information, and of such a nature that I blessed the thought that had induced me to retain so many troops in the north. He left again some hours later with Quarovitch.

Between Prince Venoff and the Bornian Minister, there was a great deal of going to and fro. Our Foreign Minister, full of wiles, played his part to perfection. He asked for more time, appeared to meditate compliance with the terms of the ultimatum, suggested compromises with every sign of nervousness; but all to no avail, the Bornian was relentless.

I cannot remember meeting a man so born to be duped. He was enormously

conceited, overbearing, and haughty. He only possessed a modicum of those qualities a Minister needs.

Had he been a wiser man, our course of procedure would have been very different, but as it was he was fooled completely, and the more fooled he was the more pressing he became in his demands.

At last we could hold him off no longer, even if we had wished to; and he was recalled upon war being declared.

CHAPTER XIII

So war had come, and I, for one, thanked God that it had not found us unprepared.

The first shot of the war was fired at Ruln. It took the enemy three days, and cost them many lives, to drive our small force out of that place. It was on that day that they made their first move from the north, and it is with this attack that I will deal first.

A thousand men seized Melanov, driving out a small force of ill-equipped Rudarlians. These retired with every appearance of panic and surprise. It was Captain von Essens who was responsible for this move, and he had chosen his men for their intelligence; they must have acted their part extremely well.

The enemy advanced rapidly, their cavalry reached Nardal and occupied that place without resistance. On the other flank they reached half-way to Villatov. The ground, however, in that direction was eminently unsuited for cavalry work, and a small body of Rudarlians held them there successfully.

At Viritz, their main force met with considerable resistance, as we determined to make them bring up as large a number of troops as possible. Our old guns were conspicuous, and in spite of their age did considerable damage. Again we lost ground, retiring, before an overwhelming force, some seven miles, to a range of hills where we were heavily entrenched. We left Viritz in a hurry, leaving behind us a number of obsolete guns carefully rendered useless; I had given them to the Bornians as I had promised.

They occupied Viritz, and I heard with great satisfaction that they were congratulating themselves on the easiness with which they were progressing. They made the fatal blunder of under-estimating an adversary. It was what I had wished and schemed for. The concentration of their troops at Viritz, preparatory to a final rush through to Karena, gave us time to complete our defences on the hills, and

there we sat and waited.

The three roads which led from Viritz to Karena, Romlitz, and Kelbna ran through the hills at places where, strangely enough, minerals had been found; between these roads, linking them up, were our troops. The roads were also joined by a military road, on the side nearest to Karena. This had been built especially for the movements of troops.

So far they had made no use of the aeroplane which had been seen by Carruthers, and we did not wish them to know of ours, until necessary. Then an accident took place which might have upset our plans considerably: my two trained aeronauts were standing together talking, when a shell burst near them; killing one, wounding the other, and completely smashing one of the aircraft. It was the first shell, from a battery that had taken up a position to try and force us from our entrenchments. As soon as this was reported to me, I rode over to see whether something could be done, but, alas, the damaged machine was beyond repair, even if we had had anyone to fly in it. I must confess that the sight of the other standing there all ready for use made me feel despondent, especially as a few minutes later we saw the Bornian machine rise in the air from behind their line.

I sat there impotent, and watched the accursed thing come flying towards, and then over us. She could make her observations and we could do nothing to prevent her. I rode a little way back still looking at the machine, and then from behind me I heard a cheer, a wild exhilarating sound which caused me to turn again quickly. Our own aeroplane was just rising from the ground. I stared in astonishment. I had no idea that anyone could fly amongst my officers, whoever it was should reap a rich reward. Then one of my aides-de-camp came towards me at a gallop.

"Who is on that?" I asked with a wave of my hand to the ascending machine.

"Monsieur Carruthers, your Majesty."

Rupert! and I never knew that he could fly. It did not surprise me, however, it was just the kind of thing which he would enjoy.

My heart beat rapidly as I watched his machine ascending higher and higher; what did he intend to do? I was not left long in doubt, for he soon started in pursuit of the Bornian. They disappeared into the clouds which rolled low over the hills behind us. The Bornian evidently knew that he was being pursued, for in a little while they reappeared again, like birds at first, but every minute growing bigger. It was a race, in which the Bornian was leading. I think that nearly every man was watching with open-mouthed astonishment. I turned my head for an instant and lost touch with them; I no longer knew which was which. My agitation must have passed to my horse, for he began to plunge, tearing at the bit.

A great cry from the soldiery, and I looked up. My God! one of them was falling horribly--like a great wounded eagle--the other kept on its way towards

the enemy's lines.

I almost broke down then, I know that I covered my face with my hands and groaned; my old friend, my dear old pal, had gone. Those around me kept silent in sympathy, for they knew how strong had been the bond between their King and the English lord.

I did not look any more, but motioned to some one to find out all he could of the catastrophe. This was no time for private grief. Carruthers had given his life for me, and now we must fight to preserve our own.

There was a depressed feeling among the troops, the failure of our aeroplanes had dampened them, I think they regarded it as a bad omen. I turned to give an order, and saw on my aide's face a look of supreme astonishment.

"Look, your Majesty, he's coming back."

I looked. What an extraordinary thing, for what reason would he return? And then the men began to shout, wildly, and I knew the reason: it was our machine that was returning; it had been the Bornian who had come to the ground.

It was as if the sun had suddenly shone out, on every face there was a smile, and gone, for ever, the feeling of depression.

It was one of the happiest moments of my life when Carruthers came to report on his trip over Viritz. I felt inclined literally to hug him, but had to be content with his salute.

His report was satisfactory.

All that day the artillery fire was kept up with but small loss to us, and night fell.

I had instructed the gunners to cease firing, to make it appear as though some of them had been put out of action, and so little by little our fire had slackened. So far the forts had not spoken.

Anyone on the look out that night would have seen three rockets soar into the sky over Karena; they were very important, but the enemy did not know that such was the case. As it was, they conveyed a message to General von Quarovitch.

And then morning came, and with it the attack. A tremendous bombardment for some two hours, which did little damage, as our men had literally dug themselves in, and then the infantry advanced; a feeble fire met them until within a few hundred yards, and then they were simply swept away. No human beings could have withstood that rain of fire, and they fled back, while all the time our cavalry hung upon their flanks creating further panic among them.

Again their artillery opened fire, and this time our forts came into action; the roar of their big guns must have awakened the Bornians to the terrible position, especially as they must have heard, about that time, that Quarovitch had cut right across their communications with some fifteen thousand men. He had carried out his part with consummate skill, and was then entrenched in a strong position

south of Melanov.

I think General von Brote, realising his position, thought that his only chance lay in breaking through on the Karena road. Perhaps he imagined that we were in less force than we were. I don't know, but anyhow he tried the impossible.

A few miles east of the Karena road, there was a break in the hills, and it was this way that General von Brote thought to turn our flank. I cannot understand his reasoning, for he must have known that it was extremely unlikely that we should have left such a way open, especially as it was cavalry country; but I can only suppose that he still did not realise that we were thoroughly prepared.

I have said it was cavalry country, so it was, right up to the break, and on the other side towards Yungben, but the break itself was rather an extraordinary piece of ground.

Right across the whole width, which at the greatest was some three miles, were strewn immense boulders, some singly, others arranged in heaps for some hundred yards, only in the centre was there a space of about half a mile free from them. Instead of the boulders a narrow stream ran across. It was a stream which watered the plains round Yungben, twisting and winding in a most weird fashion. In time of rain, it sometimes flooded the fields around, but now it ran steadily and calmly, little dreaming, if streams can dream, of the horrible sights it was to see before many hours had passed, or of the dead bodies of man and beast with which its clear waters were to be choked.

In order to make this break as impregnable as I could, without showing any great signs, I had constructed a low, barbed wire entanglement on the Yungben side of the stream; this entanglement, although low, was fifty yards wide; behind that again, I had rifle pits dug, but instead of banking up the earth it was scattered over the ground. Besides this I had placed a battery of horse artillery on either flank, while the line of boulders was also guarded with entanglements and maxims; altogether we had some three thousand troops guarding that spot. The guns, and the men, were concealed behind bushes and small trees, as well as the masses of rock, some hundred men only being on view.

Against this defence, there were some five thousand of the enemy. Relying upon the reports of their scouts, who had been misled by the small number of our men to be seen, their cavalry swept forward. They were too far from their supports, their artillery was unable to come into action, on account of their forward movement. They swept on blindly, trusting to sweep away the little force opposed to them. Our men opened fire at two thousand yards, they did some damage but not enough even to make them think; they rode on and on, the nearer they got, the more men they lost.

They were within one hundred yards of the stream, when the rest of our

infantry came into action. It must have been appalling, although even then they struggled to get to close quarters, but the stream held them, the entanglements held them, and all the while death was poured from the barrels of our rifles and maxim guns; what was left of them turned and fled. Their artillery opened, but, before they could get the range, our batteries replied, and we had our ranges marked. They retired. It will never be known how many men they lost, for the remnant of that force was engulfed in the ruin that had overtaken the main bodies.

Our right wing advanced, joining the two thousand men who had been posted on the Villatov road. General von Brote massed his guns and men on the Karena road; our left advanced. He hurled regiment after regiment at our front, they were mown down by the hundred. As night fell he retreated to Viritz, and our whole line advanced. His cavalry on the left wing, at Nardal, were called in. There they rested for the night, but with earliest dawn our attack commenced. Hemmed in on all sides, they fought like lions, but it was unavailing. Then they tried to retreat still farther, and Quarovitch held them. It was the end. Without a single chance of success, they fought on, although three times I sent a white flag with a message to Brote, asking him to refrain from further useless bloodshed. He was resolved to die rather than surrender. He did die, and then what was left of his army threw down their weapons.

Of the thirty-five thousand men who had entered Rudarlia through Melanov, only seventeen thousand surrendered, the rest had been killed, wounded, or were already prisoners.

Their surprise, to which they had evidently looked to end the war quickly, had failed utterly. Our northern frontier was now safe, and I could throw most of our men to the relief of Avilinoff. We had lost altogether some four thousand men in killed and wounded. I left eleven thousand to clear up the scattered Bornians, and guard the frontier and prisoners, the other twenty-five thousand I hurried south. Many of them had not been in the firing line at all, so they were perfectly fresh, and brim-full of enthusiasm and eagerness to come to grips with the foe.

In order to avoid any delay--which would have been almost inevitable had we returned through Karena--I, with my aides, motored through Romlitz to Agrade. There I stayed for only one day. Scutane was delighted to hear that the extra troops were on the way down, as he said that Avilinoff had been rather hard pressed at Milova, but that now he was in a good position to defend that place. Accordingly, I left for Avilinoff's head-quarters immediately.

It was evident that the enemy had counted on the success of their northern attack, as they had not hastened, rather luckily for us, for Avilinoff's army was sadly outnumbered, both in men and guns.

He had done grand work, his retreats were as orderly as parades, which spoke well for the troops under his command. I found that his army had occupied

a strong position extending from Nadir on the left, to Pinofska on the right. So far, not a single Bornian had managed to cross the Loina. Now, however, when the news from the north became known, there was new vigour put into both armies. The Bornians at once realised that their dawdling methods would not succeed, and, also, they were spurred to try and blot out the disaster at Viritz.

The Rudarlians, in their turn, were more resolved than ever to beat back their enemy; success dispelled all the bad effects of a tedious retreat.

Success was an excellent tonic, yet it could not equalise the opposing forces, although every day saw that inequality grow less, as trainload after trainload of fresh troops poured into Agrade and Milova; but the greatest thing for us was the fact that the artillery became more of a strength.

For four days the position underwent no change, in spite of some vigorous attacks, both by night and day. On the fifth day we lost Nadir, through a brilliant flanking attack of the enemy's cavalry. There is no doubt that we were completely surprised, as we had never believed for one minute that they would have attempted the road from Alzar to Drenda, with any considerable force. Our troops, guarding the narrow road through the hills south-east of Nadir, were easily disposed of and taken in the rear; Nadir became untenable. We fell back to Lortrun, a move which considerably weakened our left wing, by lengthening it. However, it now rested safely at the extreme end, for our rear was guarded by the Drenda marshes, across which I knew it was impossible to move troops.

Our position was not satisfactory, so I sent word to Quarovitch to bring every available man to Agrade. By this time the north was quiet and he brought six thousand with him. Two thousand of these were cavalry. The same night that he arrived, he came to meet me, and, with Avilinoff, we worked for some hours on a scheme which I had thought of.

We strengthened our left wing with some twenty thousand men, some straight from Agrade to Vilt, the others, by way of Roltoiv across the Loina to Lortrun. Five thousand men were sent to hold Butrem and the road to Milova; while another five thousand were dispatched to strengthen the right flank, and entrench from Trun to Atar, and from Trun to the mountains on the west of Pinofska.

While these movements were being carried out, the Bornians were by no means idle, but pushed their attacks strongly. More than once it seemed that our line would be pierced, but, thanks to our artillery, which prevented them from crossing the Loina, we managed to hold our ground.

The fierceness of their attack really stood us in good stead, for it enabled us to carry out our plans without showing our hand.

Under the guise of a forced retirement, we drew back to the new lines we had prepared. From the mountains by Pinofska our line ran in a double curve to

Butrem; there it stopped, and both sides of the Loina were left undefended as far as Vilt, from whence our line ran to Lortrun.

Imagining that we were in retreat, and seeking to cut in behind Milova, they hurled their forces across and straddled the Loina; in this way, they, in their turn split their line, but not to their advantage, for in order to advance on the northern bank they were obliged to mass their troops in a narrow strip of land, not wide enough for them to manoeuvre in properly.

When they had crossed, and were engaged in a fierce attack on Vilt, our forces moved out from Lortrun. By sheer weight of numbers we regained Nadir and the Drenda road.

We entrenched ourselves well along the Nadir-Vilt road, and for two days repulsed every attack made by the Bornians. Then, when they had exhausted themselves in vain, we in our turn advanced, doubling their right wing back upon itself, by a series of brilliant bayonet charges, which drove them headlong from their trenches. Then, while they were in disorder, our cavalry got to work. I had collected a large force in Nadir, and fresh, with high spirits, they were irresistible, sweeping all before them. At the same time, we allowed Pinofska to go, retiring eastward to defend Agrade and leaving open the road to Kelbna.

It was apparently too tempting a bait to be refused, and they weakened their centre to reinforce their left. It was only owing to this that we dared to drive their right in the way we did, and that was eminently satisfactory; for, driven back on themselves in hopeless confusion, they united with their other forces south of Butrem, not in a strong line capable of defence, but in an indescribable state of tangle. In many places along the Loina, their forces would be trying to cross the river at the same time, but in different directions. We drove them from Farnov, and then the remnant of their right wing fell back to try and defend their communications with Lorif.

We captured a tremendous mass of war material, guns and prisoners, as it was impossible, owing to the rapidity of our movements, for the forces on the northern bank of the Loina to recross and get away in time.

The crumpling of their right wing necessitated the drawing in of their left, so they did not progress far beyond Pinofska; and little by little we drove them back from there until we reoccupied our old lines across the Kelbna road.

We now had an undoubted superiority in all arms, as well as a greater number of men; but, try how we would, for some days we could not make any real progress beyond the Pinofska-Trun-Farnov line.

Each day I rode or motored along this line to hold conversations with the different generals, and to encourage the wounded; the actual fighting men did not need encouragement, they were brim-full of zeal and confidence.

It was during this period that I was delivered from that enemy of mine,

Prince Alexis.

Between Trun and Atar the road is of an intensely beautiful nature, presenting many different kinds of scenery, well wooded in places, with gentle slopes running down to small streams which feed the Loina, while always to the north rose the mountains. The road itself rises and falls with delightful frequency, from an artistic point of view, although I doubt if the farmers who live in the vicinity, or their horses, really appreciate it. On the top of one of these inclines the road was bisected by a cart track, and in order to obtain a view over the surrounding country I had turned off along this track, accompanied by Woolgast, Scutane, and some dozen troopers.

It was soon after daybreak, and we were returning from Pinofska, where I had slept the night before. I do not know quite how it happened, but, on attempting to retrace our steps, we discovered that our way was blocked by some fifty of the enemy's cavalry. It was extremely lucky for us that we saw them before they saw us, for it gave us time to get speed on our horses. To charge was the only thing for us to do, and we struck them hard; in a few seconds we were through them, all save two of the troopers who had been shot down. We raced for the road, with the Bornians hard at our heels. We could hear from their cries, that they knew I was of the party and it made them redouble their efforts to overtake us; they kept up a fusillade of revolver shots, but fortunately without effect.

Our horses fairly flew along that muddy track, but, quickly as we went, the Bornians were as quick, and as we turned into the Trun road they were a very little way behind. In their eagerness to capture me, they must have forgotten that all the time we were approaching our lines, for they never slackened their pace, and in consequence ran into the arms of a regiment of Rudarlian cavalry at the foot of the hill.

It was over very quickly, they had the discretion to surrender at once, with one exception. This one had, either through his horse, or for other reasons, ridden well behind his comrades, but he could not hope to escape by turning back up the hill, so instead, he made a dash for liberty, by jumping the bank which bordered the road towards the enemy's lines. I heard Woolgast give a grunt, and the next moment he had followed.

I sprang from my horse and stood on the higher ground looking after him. The ground over which he was riding sloped gently down to a stream below, on the other side of which the ground rose again and was well wooded, not with big trees, but small brushwood. Woolgast was at full charge after the flying Bornian, it was a magnificent sight to see the two horses stretching out, the one flying, the other in pursuit. The pursued turned in his saddle and fired, Woolgast swerved a little but kept on, ever drawing nearer. Some three lengths from the stream, he overtook the Bornian; we saw his sword flash once, and the enemy dropped from

his horse. Then Woolgast, unable to stop his, urged him to the jump, and, slowly returning, jumped the stream again, and alighted. He walked up to the Bornian's body--which made a light blue patch among the stubble--and then reeled suddenly over on to the top of him.

He was not seriously hurt, thank God, but simply in a faint. When we turned the dead Bornian, so that we could see his face--it was Prince Alexis.

I confess that I felt relief at his death, he was so degraded that there was nothing he would not have stooped to do. I might have felt sorrow at the death of an ordinary enemy, but in the case of Alexis, no--simply relief.

Woolgast was evidently disturbed in his mind as to the consequence of his action, for he sent me word that he craved an audience.

He was in a state of feverish excitement, for the wound, although not severe, was a painful one.

"Well, General?" I said.

"There is something I wish to tell your Majesty. It is this: I called to the Prince to surrender, before and after he shot me."

"Quite so, General, and you did right; you also did right in cutting him down when he refused. You did both Rudarlia and myself a good service in killing him."

He heaved a sigh of relief.

"Thank God, your Majesty, I did not know----"

"What I should feel about it? Well, you know now, and can sleep in peace; but be quick in recovering, for I need you."

I had become genuinely fond of Woolgast. He was a man whom I had a great admiration for; and, seeing that he was generally near me, I had a good many opportunities of discovering his worth. I know that he was devoted to me.

To return to the main battle. For a week or more the fighting continued without advantage to either side, at least, neither the Bornians nor ourselves were able to say that we had definitely advanced our lines. There could be no doubt, however, that our artillery did much damage, although not sufficient to allow us to assault their positions.

It was necessary that we should break through their line somewhere, but the difficult question was where and how to do it.

We had smashed their right flank by stratagem; we had split our force in two to do this. We would now do the same thing on our right, that is to say we would give up the bridge of Atar.

I had explained thus far to the generals, when General von Scutane said:

"But, your Majesty, they will not bite twice at the same bait."

"I should be sorry if they did, General, for it would not be what I wish. I believe that they will think that we intend to advance our flanks. I am trusting to them weakening their centre, for I intend to strike hard for Villet."

"Then you propose to hold the Kelbna road from Trun through Pinofska, and then from Blanne to Farnov?"

"That is my idea; and, in order to confirm them in the opinion that we intend flanking movements, we will move troops from Milova to Trun and Farnov by day, and move them back again at night. We must do everything we can to strengthen their belief that we wish to repeat the plan which succeeded so well on our left. If necessary, our flanks must fall back."

"It is a scheme full of danger, your Majesty."

"And also full of possibilities."

"Yes, your Majesty, of defeat as well as of success."

"That I refuse to consider, although we will take all precautions against such a thing. However, I do not press my scheme if anyone can suggest a better. You must remember that time is flying and the Bornians can bring two recruits to our one, while their line of communications from Ruln is not long, and so they have not very great difficulties in regard to transport."

That was the stratagem adopted, and the movements of our troops for the next two days puzzled even our own men. There is no doubt that the enemy were puzzled too, but they took the situation in the way that we wished.

We decided not to evacuate Atar, which--as I had foreseen--they did not bite at.

When both our flanks were hotly engaged, our forward movement in the centre began. It was a costly effort, but it succeeded.

We got them on the run and kept them so, driving a wedge right through the centre of their line towards Villet. It was their left wing which suffered this time from the Loina--that was a fateful river for them. We drove them out of Villet itself, and then began the most terrible struggle of the war, for that small town was life or death to them. Three times they took it, and as many times we drove them out again, each time with greater ease, for every hour saw our position improve, as we concentrated our artillery. Then they found that Villet was lost to them for ever; it was a fact that they realised with difficulty.

But, once they did so, the end came quickly. Cut off from Lorif, their only way of escape back to Bornia, they surrendered in masses. The remainder of their army withdrew sullenly towards their frontier. They conducted their retreat in fairly good order.

Had we liked, we could have utterly crushed them, but we refrained from pressing too closely upon their rearguard for two reasons: we did not wish to sacrifice the lives of our troops needlessly, and the Bornians were hopelessly beaten. I daresay it was wrong not to drive them with all our might, I'm sure that the military text-books would say so, but I was only a civilian after all.

I had sent, as soon as we could spare the troops, a column into Garace, that

province which had been lost to us for so long.

They met with little opposition, for the Bornian forces there were very scanty and quite without enterprise, or enthusiasm.

Before we had finished there, almost before the beaten remnant had left Lorif, Bornia sued for peace.

CHAPTER XIV

Bornia sued for peace; they could do nothing else, for they were hopelessly beaten both by land and sea.

Prince Kleber had been busy with the Bornians on the water, and the *Soctia* had made a great name for herself; a large number of prizes were now in the harbour of Soctia, and she had successfully carried on a vigorous warfare with the Bornian Navy.

Prince Kleber had done much to facilitate our progress in Garace, especially at Bustelov, where the Bornians were well fortified; it was largely owing to the clever co-operation of the navy that our troops occupied that place without a prolonged siege.

The only time that Rudarlian troops entered Bornia, was the day when peace was declared; then a small number escorted the signatories, for a mile, to their side of the frontier.

So completely were the Bornians beaten that, in spite of the moral support of certain great powers, they accepted our terms at once; well they might, for they were, considering, very moderate: the evacuation of Garace, and a certain sum as war indemnity were the two chief items.

We had no wish to exasperate a badly beaten enemy; nor did we wish to claim territorial aggrandisement beyond the recovery of our one-time province of Garace.

It has always seemed to me to be bad policy to demand too much from a beaten adversary, excepting when that enemy is dangerous to the peace of the world, or, indeed, of your nation; for, unless the necessity is great, a beaten opponent should be treated with consideration. But there are cases, no doubt, when it is expedient to destroy completely a nation's power to do harm in the future.

It seemed that, with the end of the war, a better understanding at once began between the two countries; perhaps the fighting was like the old-fashioned

remedy of blood-letting.

It is impossible to describe the feelings of joy and pride with which I thought of Rudarlia and the Rudarlians; they had proved themselves so splendid, and now that the war had been carried to a successful conclusion I hoped that economic conditions would begin to improve and the prosperity of the country be assured.

I will confess to certain day-dreams in that respect, and obtained quite a lot of pleasure from them.

As soon as peace was declared, the inhabitants of Rudarlia began to show their joy; and it was overwhelming, even in the most out-of-the-way villages the poorest of the people held marvellous celebrations.

I think the most trying time of my whole life was during my visits to all parts of Rudarlia. I thought that I should never have any pleasure in speaking again, for in every corner of my country it was thought necessary to hand me addresses.

In Garace, the people were almost crazy with joy at having thrown off the Bornian bonds, and being under the Rudarlian flag again.

Although this time was, as I have said, most trying, yet it was inspiring and certainly satisfactory; I defy even the most cold-blooded person to listen to a nation's cheers, without feeling a deep glow of pleasure. I, personally, do not attempt to deny that it pleased me, for it meant that I had made good.

A great number of months passed before the nation settled down to their normal lives; and the time of the officials, from King to Mayor, was taken up in the many duties that fell upon them.

Perhaps the most hard-worked people of all were the doctors and nurses, for the hospitals were full, and I would not have any man turned away without being absolutely cured of his wounds, if such a thing were possible. Those whose wounds rendered them unfit for further military service received a plot of land, or, if they chose, a sum of money.

Then there were the honours and rewards to be settled, the various recompenses for farms and homesteads destroyed in the war, and a thousand and one things beside.

Upon Carruthers, who had been of incalculable value to us through his air-work, I bestowed the Cross of Rudarlia, an honour of which he was intensely proud, in spite of his assurances to the contrary. Much as I should have liked him to stop in Rudarlia, I did not press him when he came to bid me good-bye, for I knew that he would have his work cut out to explain matters to the authorities in England. I was convinced, however, that he would do it quite successfully, for he had a most engaging way of getting himself out of scrapes.

General von Quarovitch had received a substantial grant from the Government to enable him to uphold his new rank, for I had made him Count. He was

also given a command of more importance than the frontier, and so he was often in Karena. In fact, he was now as much sought after as before he had been neglected; but he took his sudden popularity very grimly, which caused me huge enjoyment. His treatment of the fair sex was a never failing source of delight; they called him bearish, but devoted themselves to him.

I had also made Woolgast a Count, and I do not think that there were many to sneer at his new rank. He had quite recovered from the wound given him by Alexis; and was now, as usual, always at my side.

He was a man who never asked for any favour, either for himself or his family; he was as devoted to me as anyone could be, and it was his delight to accompany me in command of the escort wherever I went. I always made a point of taking an escort of my regiment of guards, for I believed the people loved to see the white and gold of their uniforms, and to know that their King rode or drove among them with regal pomp and glory. The Rudarlians, in that respect, were rather barbaric in their tastes; and yet, I am not sure that it is not a good thing to keep alive the love of show, I believe it really brightens the lives of the people, who so often live in dull monotony. I myself confess to a certain quickening of the pulses at sight of martial pomp, and also when I hear the jingling music of a cavalry regiment. There is something fine and inspiring in the sight of a number of men splendidly upright and strong, moving together as though one man, and to realise that they are prepared to give their lives for an ideal—for the love of country is nothing else. I have heard it said that an ideal will move men to acts of greater heroism than any fact; it may be so, but I always look upon an ideal as a mental fact in itself, so I can hardly argue the point.

I shall never forget the first time I dined privately after the war. There were just four of us, my mother, Prince Zeula, Mr. Neville, and myself, and we had old Bauen up to wait upon us. I wanted to feel absolutely free to say what I would without feeling that there might be one of the servants listening.

It was quite like old times, yet not so very old, only a few years, but years so full of incident that each seemed to have multiplied itself by ten. In those few years I had changed from a boy into a man, from a commoner into a king; and it may safely be surmised that such changes must have a considerable effect on anyone.

They were rich years for me to look back upon and so full of mental, and perhaps moral wealth, that I was almost fearful of their effect upon me. I was afraid that I should lose my youth before the time, that manhood's cares would sap the joy of life within me, and, by so doing, injure the power I had to feel and sympathise with the many defects in human nature.

My mother, to whom I had spoken of this, agreed that it might be so with some people, but not in my case. A remark which was so intensely human in its

mother feeling, that I laughed and said no more.

This dinner à *quatre* was very enjoyable. We seemed to forget for a while that we were really people of importance in our world, and we laughed and joked with all the old-time zest, and perhaps more; never since my accession had we been so gay and cheerful. Zeula, who seemed to grow younger each month, had a wonderful collection of anecdotes, and his wit was great.

We might have been a party on the stage playing some clever farce, for the conversation never flagged, and even I was witty, which was unusual, since I have never possessed real gifts in that line, although I have, thank God, a sense of humour.

It did me good to look at the three faces I loved so well, and listen to the conversation, noting the difference in their trends of thought.

Zeula, brilliant, polished.

Mr. Neville, dry, rather caustic.

My mother, intensely feminine.

They made, however, a very good combination, and a subject was dissected very thoroughly by the three.

Towards the end of the meal, the topics of conversation became more personal, bearing more directly on the future of Rudarlia.

It was at this point that I began to feel a rather comic uneasiness, for my instinct told me that before long some remark would lead up to the subject of my marriage, and I knew that Zeula would be responsible for it, as he was wrapped up in the subject.

I was not mistaken, for he made a remark about a King without heirs. My mother glanced at me quickly. I deliberately winked at Mr. Neville, who laughed outright.

"So, Prince," said I, "you have thrown your bomb."

"I awaited a fitting opportunity, your Majesty."

"Pray forget ceremony," murmured my mother.

"Then, Mr. Smith," said I, with a grimace, "you have given me indigestion."

"I did not ask you to bolt your food, Victor."

"Meaning?"

"That there is no particular hurry."

"For a week or two," chimed in Mr. Neville, and set us all laughing.

Although we laughed at first, it was only at first, for the question was an extremely important one, both for myself and Rudarlia. I knew that it was imperative that I should marry, and I also realised that the time had come to think seriously about it, and incidentally to find the wife.

"I understand that my position is one of some uncertainty, that you wish me to marry and have heirs, but the question which puzzles me is, who am I to

marry?"

"There will not be any difficulty in that, Victor."

"And yet I do not see in which direction to look, for I can hardly hope, as King of a small kingdom like Rudarlia, to ally myself with any of the great powers."

"Perhaps you have already thought of some one; I confess that I find it difficult myself."

"Yes, I have thought of one. It will most probably come as a great surprise when you hear where I propose to look for a wife, but I have looked at the question from every point of view, and it seems to me that I had better marry a Princess of--Bornia."

As I had surmised, the suggestion surprised them; I do not think the possibility of it had once struck them. They were silent for some little time as though pondering on what I had said, only Mr. Neville looked at me quizzically, my mother and Zeula keeping their eyes turned from mine. The latter was the first to speak:

"I had not thought of that, Victor; will you tell us your reasons?"

"Oh yes, I have thought a great deal about our relations with our late foe, and it seems to me that such a marriage as I suggest would do much to remove the bitterness that there undoubtedly is between the two nations. That is my first reason. The second is, that if all the Bornian Princesses married Germans or Austrians, as the odds are they would, there would be endless friction between our nations, whereas, if I marry one of them, the influence will not be so one-sided. My third reason is not so realisable, but it may come true. It is an imaginary condition which circumstances may bring about, therefore it can hardly be looked upon as a real reason, and I was wrong to so describe it; I will, however, tell you that it was a dream which united the two kingdoms under one monarch. There is little real difference between the two races, and who knows what the future may bring forth?"

"Two of your reasons are excellent, Victor, and the third is within the range of possibilities."

"Have you seen photographs of the Bornian Princesses?" asked Mr. Neville.

"Very indifferent ones, and without knowing one from the other."

"And which do you propose offering your hand to?"

"I do not know yet, I therefore suggest that a trip to Bornia would be an admirable thing, so that I may see them first."

"Eh?"

"Yes, the week after next I propose going for a walking tour through Garace, and will visit Sonale. I shall not be known in Bornia's capital--I will shave off my moustache. I shall have a good time, ascertain the public feeling towards the said Princesses, also I shall see them."

"That sounds quite an attractive programme," said Mr. Neville, smiling. "May I ask whether it is your intention to go alone?"

"Not if I can induce you to accompany me. If you will, my mother's mind will be made easy, Prince Zeula will not insist upon a regiment in mufti accompanying me, and I--well, you know that I shall be pleased."

"I will go with the greatest pleasure."

"Then we will call it settled."

"Do you think it wise, Victor?" asked my mother.

"It may not be the essence of wisdom, yet it will give me a little feeling of romance."

Zeula laughed.

"Will you carry a lute with you to serenade the Princesses, and a shield with a flaming heart as device?"

"Make the musical instrument a lyre, it would most probably serve a fuller purpose," said I, "but I daresay you all realise and understand what I mean, and if you don't I am ashamed of you."

"Of course we do; but never forget to go out without your revolver, there is more than one Goltz in the world."

"That was a lesson I have not forgotten, nor do I wish it repeated; and, to get away from unpleasant topics, would you all like a game of bridge?"

We played two rubbers; my partner and I did not score a game.

"Remembering the old saying, you ought to be very lucky in love," said Mr. Neville.

CHAPTER XV

Mr. Neville and I were enjoying ourselves immensely. We were both glad to be relieved from the cares and worries of Court ceremonies; both glad of a holiday; pleased to be able to tramp through the dusty lanes, free to sleep where we would, eat and drink what and when we felt inclined.

We talked of everything while tramping, or resting, as the case might be, with the sky blue above us, or heavy with great masses of cloud; and breathed in the fresh buoyant air of the Garacian mountains, or the warmer, milder air of the valleys; and forgot, or pretended to, for a little while, that we were people who mattered.

I daresay we both talked too much; perhaps all we said was not of the wisest; but, unfettered, we chatted like schoolboys. I doubt if there was ever so perfect a companion as Mr. Neville: he seemed to know exactly the mood you were in, and to be able to broach a subject of conversation suited to it.

Of my marriage, or rather the idea of it, we spoke but little. From what I told him, he gathered that my mind was made up on the point that I must marry, and the sooner the better.

Garace was a magnificent province; and visiting it as we did gave us a very clear idea of why the Rudarlians had been so pleased at its recovery.

Wherever we went, the fields and pastures gave evidence of great fertility; they were well watered, too; but the roads were terribly bad, and one could well understand that the farmers found great difficulty in handling their produce. It struck us that the Bornians had no particular reason to boast of the way they had governed the province.

It had not been my intention to waste all the time we were on our holiday, and so Mr. Neville and I made many notes, and discussed many plans dealing with the country through which we passed. Then at night we went carefully over these, and gave them fuller discussion before finally sending them to Karena.

The Minister to whom they were sent was thankful enough for any assistance in what was rather an arduous task.

We had been ten days on our wanderings before we reached Bornia, and then by a terribly bad road over the mountains. We slept out that night, and the next day dined at Stranz, a little town two or three miles from the frontier. I should say we ate there, since the only food available was castradina--the smoked mutton which the peasants love--a coarse white cheese, and cakes or loaves of maize. Plain, very plain; food, but not a dinner.

Had we walked any distance that morning, we should no doubt have been ready to declare the eatables fit for a king; but, as it was, we had only progressed two or three miles. A delightfully mossy bank by the side of a little mountain stream had enticed us to sit and sit, and keep on sitting, or rather sprawling; hour after hour we had sat there talking and smoking, until we decided that we had lazed long enough, and sauntered down to the so-called inn. I remember we chaffed each other about want of appetite.

Having paid an exorbitant sum for a practically uneaten meal, we refilled our pipes, and went out again into the sunshine.

Stranz boasted of one street, with some two hundred houses in all; the sun, blazing down on the white walls of these, tired the eyes, especially as every movement of one's feet caused a cloud of dust to ascend. At the end of the street farthest from the inn stood the church, and I went in to say a few words to the priest and leave a small sum with him to be spent in charity.

The worthy man would, I know, have liked me to stay a while with him, to discuss everyday affairs; but it was time for us to be moving on, so I said good-bye and stepped out to Mr. Neville.

I found him staring down the road at two figures on horseback who were approaching at a good pace.

"Shall we stay and see them go past, Victor?"

"Yes, they may be interesting."

In a few minutes they passed, a lady and her groom; that was all I had time to notice, for I was more interested in the horses than their riders. They could not have been more than two lengths away from where we were standing, when from the other end of the street came a crowd of people yelling terribly. The hurricane of cries frightened the lady's horse, which reared, slipped, and came down; the groom's horse became unmanageable, got the bit between its teeth and bolted.

Through the dust we could see the crowd of men, women, and children flying towards us, and after them a single man foaming at the mouth.

"My God, he's mad!" said Mr. Neville.

The crowd scattered in every direction, some through open doorways, some even through windows, all scrambling and pushing to get out of the way of this terrible being. As he came nearer, I could see that he was dressed as a gentleman, and that he carried a rapier in his hand. A moment later he used it, for a child, terrified, ran across the road, the madman lunged in passing, and the poor little thing fell into the gutter.

We had been so amazed at the suddenness of this scene that we had remained standing where we were. The street was empty now, save for the lady who was standing horrified in the middle of the road, the fallen horse, the still, small body in the gutter, the madman, and ourselves.

Perhaps the wounding of the child had caused the madman to pause in his mad rush, for now, bent almost double, he was creeping towards the still motionless figure of the lady, who suddenly turned, and with a little scream of fear ran towards us.

Her face was white, and her two dark eyes were turned imploringly to us, as though she knew that we could save her from this awful man.

At the same moment both Mr. Neville and I jumped forward to bar his way. I carried a stout stick, Mr. Neville had none; luckily the man lunged at me, for I was enabled to turn his point with my stick. Over the madman's face there stole a look of really malevolent cunning. I believe, then, he fancied in his poor, disordered mind that he was fighting a duel.

"Careful, Victor!" I heard Mr. Neville say.

"All right, I am going to try to disarm him; be ready to seize him if I succeed."

I spoke in English, so that the man, even if he had any glimmering of reason,

would in all probability not understand.

It was quite extraordinary to me that any man as mad as he could fight with so much skill; perhaps the madness lent him additional craftiness, but he must have been a fine swordsman when sane. As it was, he gave me more to do than any man I have ever fought with, and more than once came near wounding me; but I got him into the position I wanted and disarmed him, his sword flying through the window of a house near by.

As the weapon left his hand, Mr. Neville's arms were round him, and in a few seconds he was bound and helpless.

My first thought was for the child; he was not dead, but the rapier had inflicted a nasty wound in his shoulder. However, as he was in the capable hands of his mother, who evidently possessed the knowledge of how to treat wounds of the less serious nature, I turned away relieved.

I found the lady by my side, and one of the most musical voices that I have ever heard gave me thanks.

"Ah, monsieur, how can I ever thank you and your friend enough?"

I felt that I was blushing furiously--quite ridiculously--why, I have no idea, as it was not common to me. My companion told me afterwards that I stammered like a schoolboy and looked as awkward.

"Madame--mademoiselle----"

"Not both, monsieur, only the latter."

"Mademoiselle, it was nothing, there was little danger to me."

"It was the bravest deed I have ever seen, in spite of your desire to belittle it, and I thank you again."

Until now I had not really looked at her, but my mind seemed to clear suddenly, and I knew her rather than saw her. I find it hard to recall my first impressions, I realised that strictly speaking she was not beautiful, yet she was beautiful. Whether it was the expression, or subtle emanations from a beautiful soul, I cannot say, but that is what I think. I was absorbed, confused by the strength of her personality. I do not suppose it would affect all people in the same way, perhaps it answered to similar strata in my own.

It was with an effort that I returned to what had occurred, and to what she had said.

"Mademoiselle, I belittled it, as I have the advantage of being a good swordsman. My companion, who stood by unarmed, was far more worthy of commendation."

"I have already tried to thank him." She smiled, and I noticed that her teeth were adorable. "He is English, I think, and it is so difficult to thank Englishmen properly--they always seem ashamed of doing anything brave."

"That is so; but your horse, mademoiselle, is, I am afraid, in rather a bad

way."

We walked over to where the animal now stood. I bent to examine the strained fetlock, while his mistress stroked his nose and talked to him encouragingly.

"It is quite impossible to ride him," I said, looking up.

"Oh dear! and it is most unlikely that there will be another horse in this place."

"But your groom, surely he will return soon?"

"I doubt it, and even if he were to, I could not ride his horse, as it is practically unbroken."

"Then," said Mr. Neville, who had rejoined us, "we must get you some kind of conveyance, unless you live within walking distance."

"The walking would be less painful, monsieur, from what I know of the carriages in this part of the country."

"You could rest here at the inn," I said.

"Could they give me something to eat, do you think?" She looked at our faces and laughed gaily. "No, that were too much to expect; then I must walk, if only for the sake of the work these good people neglect while we remain here."

There were certainly more people interested in us than the occasion merited, and there was a curious open-mouthed look about most of them.

"Mademoiselle will accept our escort?"

"Gladly, monsieur, if I do not take you out of your way."

"All ways are the same to us, save the one we shall travel in your company."

"And that will be atrocious."

"Impossible," said Mr. Neville.

"Then come; but first let me give orders about my horse, and for my groom when he returns."

It only took a few minutes to arrange these things and to gather up our belongings; and we started. I stopped for a few minutes at the house where the wounded child lay and gave his mother a coin or two to pay for necessities, as I had seen the poverty of the place. I also stopped for a moment to say a word to the priest, and ask him to look after the child. Then I rejoined the others, who had walked slowly on.

"Monsieur loves children?"

"Indeed, yes."

"Perhaps you have some of your own?"

"I am unmarried, mademoiselle."

We walked a little way in silence, I could feel my companion taking stock of me.

"Might I know the names of those to whom I am so indebted?"

"Why, of course, how stupid of me to forget--Mr. Neville, and I am Victor Stevens."

"But not English, too, surely?"

"No, I am a Rudarlian."

"Then I ought to hate you."

"Not so, since we are no longer enemies."

"Nor are we friends. Ah, I wonder whether you know to what extent this country suffers."

"In what way, mademoiselle? I thought the terms of peace were not ungenerous."

"No, indeed, they were far from that, but even so the people suffer, by the extra taxation entailed. Oh, I know that Bornia declared war, but it was the fault of a corrupt Court, not the wish of the people."

"That may be so, but still I do not see why there should be enmity between the two nations; rather should the leniency of the terms of peace augment the friendship that brave foes should have for one another. It is not as though we had demanded part of Bornia's territory, we merely regained our own province."

"I know, I know! Please don't think that we are ungrateful, but it hurts me so to think of many precious lives being lost, and so much treasure wasted to satisfy the venom of one man."

"You mean?"

"Why, Prince Alexis; it is common property that he and his clique engineered the war. He is dead, so we must speak no ill of him, but he was at the bottom of everything. I believe it was his personal hatred to King Victor which made him go to the lengths he did. But there, do not let us spoil our walk, tell me of your King; you know him, perhaps?"

"Mr. Neville has spoken to him many times," I said.

"Oh, please tell me of him; I am afraid that he is too perfect from all accounts."

"You have set me a hard task, to describe him would take too much thought for an old man, mademoiselle; but I may tell you that he is not ugly, and possesses certain good qualities."

"He is a good King, and--messieurs, you have told me your names, and courteously refrained from asking me for mine. I am Princess Irma, eldest daughter of the King of Bornia."

"Your Royal Highness has our homage and thanks," said Mr. Neville, bowing.

"Ah, please no ceremony, forget my rank, and just think of me as the girl you so bravely saved. But I had to tell you."

As for myself, I was too astonished to say a word, my longing for romance had indeed been answered with a vengeance; but it had placed me in rather a queer

position, for I could not now retain my incognito with any feelings of satisfaction: it would hardly be honourable. I must tell her, of course, but it was not the thought of that which made my blood course so strongly through my veins, it was a gust of sheer delight that I had at last met one whom I could treat as an equal, who could be my companion and whom, if it was so willed, I could learn to love. My eyes swept over her perfect figure as she turned from Mr. Neville to me. Her carriage was magnificent, with the grace and dignity which became a Princess, and the womanly charm and sweetness which became her sex; her whole expression was radiant with youth and the joy of living.

"Princess, I must crave forgiveness for having deceived you. I told you my name was Victor Stevens, I am----"

"King Victor II. of Rudarlia. Your Majesty must think me strangely obtuse, to have imagined that a shaven moustache could hide his identity."

And this delightful girl went off into a peal of laughter, in which after a moment Mr. Neville and myself joined.

"Your eyes are too keen, Princess," I said.

"I knew your Majesty's face so well that I recognised you almost immediately."

"But surely we have never met before?"

"No, but I have seen your photograph many times."

"And I yours, but I did not know you."

"That is hardly to be wondered at, as the Court photographers are notorious flatterers."

"And yet you knew me?"

"Your Majesty is a much more important person than I, and therefore more easily to be remembered."

"May I ask where you are staying, Princess? There is no Royal residence near here, is there?"

"No, I am visiting the family of one of the ladies-in-waiting."

"I was wondering how far we might accompany you; for, although you have been so kind with regard to my nationality, others might be less so."

"Prince de Sagresse is one of your Majesty's admirers; he does not belong to the Court."

"Then, Princess, you have no objection to our walking as far as his gates with you?"

"It will be a pleasure to me," she said shyly. "But will not your Majesty come farther than the gates? The Prince would be highly honoured."

"I shall be delighted."

"And Mr. Neville?"

"Mr. Neville has given a great deal of his life to me, Princess, he would not

now interfere with my happiness."

This sounded so like a compliment that our companion blushed slightly. I, however, did not mean it to be such, for to me it was a great delight to have some one of my own age, to whom I could talk naturally without the necessary thought that I was the King. It was an experience that was absolutely novel, and I knew that I should enjoy myself immensely. Besides which, there was the reason for my tour to be considered, and I confess to feeling very much interested in Princess Irma.

I fancy we all felt rather sorry when the turreted wall of the old château came in sight; the two miles had proved very short ones, and almost before we knew it we were standing near the gate.

The situation, from my point of view, was not uninteresting, for I had not the least idea as to how the old Bornian noble would receive the King of a country which such a short while before had been hostile. We had not long to wait, however; for, as we came in sight of the terraces in front of the house, an old white-haired gentleman came down them to greet the Princess, his face betraying a slight, well-bred surprise upon seeing her on foot, and accompanied by two gentlemen, both of whom were strangers to him.

We fell a little behind, as the Princess explained to her host the incident which had brought about our acquaintance. She then evidently explained who we were, for he came towards us with every mark of pleasure and diffidence.

I stepped forward and held out my hand.

"Prince, Her Royal Highness has perhaps told you, that, having accompanied her to your gate, we pressed for the pleasure of an introduction to her host."

"Your Majesty honours me by expressing such a desire. As it is, my house and household are at your service; the longer your Majesty will make use of it, the greater our delight."

"For an hour or two, Prince, if we may; so that we can become better acquainted."

We did not carry a great deal of unnecessary clothing with us; so, after making ourselves as presentable as we could, we were conducted to a delightful room gay with flowers, and which gave evidence of feminine occupation. One of those comfortable rooms in which you feel at home immediately, with no stiff chairs to make you think of ceremony. From a big divan, smothered in cushions, a girl uncoiled herself as we entered; uncoiled is rather an unkind word to use, but it was gracefully done, and swiftly. Her face looked familiar to me, and for a little while I could not recollect where I had seen it; she was an extremely beautiful girl--suddenly it flashed across my mind. I looked again and remembered.

"I would ask your Majesty's permission to present my daughter Sonia."

"We have already met, Prince; have we not, mademoiselle?"

"Oh!" she cried, after looking at me intently.

"How is the ankle?" I asked gravely.

"Oh!" and then to her father, who looked slightly puzzled, she said, "You remember that I hurt myself when staying on the Garude, father? It was His Majesty who helped me and was so kind."

"I lost a handkerchief, I remember," I said, laughing.

"I have it yet. I kept it as a souvenir."

"I only had the memory of a delightful afternoon to keep, mademoiselle."

"Then I had the best of it, as I had the handkerchief as well."

I was just going to make some laughing reply to this when I caught Mr. Neville's eye. There was a distinctly quizzical look in it, and it flashed across me that I had spoken to him about a girl on a mossy river bank, in terms which I could not now recall without reflecting on the folly of extreme youth. I remembered how, at that time, I seemed to be absolutely wrapped up in Sonia, how I imagined that without her my whole life must inevitably be wrecked: and now? Well, she was a charming, beautiful girl, but I did not even fancy that I was in love with her.

At this moment the Princess returned. She had made a rapid change in her toilette, and clad in some light-coloured gown she looked radiant, even beside Sonia, whom many, or rather most people, would have called the more beautiful.

The hour that I had intended to stay passed all too quickly, it ran into two, three, four, without my being aware of the lapse of time. Tea had been brought out to the terrace where we were sitting; and, after the days we had spent in not over-clean inns, the delicate linen and china and perfect service were very acceptable; but it was the charming company which was the greatest delight.

The Princess and I had worked out to the satisfaction of both of us, or nearly so, our exact degree of relationship. We differed, I remember, on the point of whether it was tenth or eleventh cousinship, three times removed; Mr. Neville finally solving it in his quiet, dry way, when we appealed to him.

"It is simplicity itself; you are undoubtedly Uncle and Aunt."

Some little while after this, Sonia made a remark about the beauty of the sky; and I realised, then, how long we had been sitting there--it was past six o'clock. Upon rising to take my leave of them, I felt genuinely sorry, so much so that when the Prince remarked that the roads were very bad, that it was a good twelve miles to the next town, and that they would consider it the highest honour if I would spend the night there, I only hesitated for a moment before accepting their offer.

I did not hesitate longer, because I knew that, even if I wanted to, I should find it very difficult to tear myself away from an atmosphere that was so happy and delightful.

As I resumed the seat that I had vacated, I was ridiculously glad to see the pleased smile with which Princess Irma greeted my decision.

After a dinner which was only ceremonious by the attendance, for our costumes were not those of full evening dress, we strolled out to enjoy the perfection of the moonlit garden.

I do not remember ever having felt so extraordinarily happy before, I am almost sure that the moon must have had an effect upon me, for I went to my room that night in a state of mind bordering upon the hilarious. I had a few minutes' conversation with Mr. Neville before turning in; I fancy he was as pleased to see me happy as nothing else could have made him.

"My dear old tutor, isn't she splendid?"

He looked at me gravely, and without twitching a muscle answered:

"She is one of the most beautiful girls I have ever seen, I no longer wonder that the idea of kingship was abhorrent to you."

"Eh?"

"It must have been a terrible wrench to give up all thought of her; and to think that she retains your handkerchief, it is really romantic, but rather pathetic."

"I don't mean Sonia."

"No?"

There was infinite surprise in his voice. I looked at him quickly--a twinkle had crept into his eyes.

"You knew that I did not mean Sonia quite well, but don't you think the Princess is simply ripping?"

"Yes, I do, my dear boy, Her Royal Highness seems to be a very noble type of womanhood."

"I say, do you think it is worth while going to Sonale?"

"There are three other sisters."

"I don't care if there are forty. I don't want to see them now; but I do want to stay on here for a few days, and I know the Prince would be very pleased. Suppose we do."

"It would be most agreeable, Victor."

"Then we will," I said.

CHAPTER XVI

The next morning was so fine and sunny that I was out of bed before five o'clock. I dressed quickly and walked over to the village of Stranz.

Early as my visit was, the inhabitants were astir, the wounded boy better. His bandages were tied in so professional a manner that I asked the mother where she had learnt.

"It was not I, Excellency, but the surgeon. He came last evening and is to come again. The lady whose horse fell down had him sent for, may the good God bless her!"

This was good news to me, for it proved that the Princess had not been so unconcerned as I had imagined her to be, and I love to see women fond of children. Her apparent coolness had been rather a disappointment. Now, however, when I thought it over, I saw how much wiser she had been to send for some one whose duty it was to attend to such cases rather than attempt anything herself. Also, there had been so many women about to offer their sympathy and advice that hers would have been little appreciated.

Thinking over this, and other things, I walked back to the château.

It was eight o'clock when I came down for the second time that morning. I went out on to the terrace, and found the Princess and her host deep in conversation.

"Your Majesty is an early riser," he said, after we had shaken hands.

"Generally, and this morning was so lovely that I could not waste it, and so went for a walk in the cool hours."

"Has your Majesty been out before, then?"

"Yes, I walked over to Stranz, where I found the wounded boy progressing well with every hope of a speedy recovery, thanks to Her Royal Highness's kindly thought."

The Princess blushed, then she gave a little laugh.

"I could do nothing myself, you know."

"Except think of the very best thing to be done," I said.

"You are kind, but then I think you must be always so."

"It is not always possible, Princess."

"But you are generally, and so I am going to ask a favour for my host: it is that your Majesty will stay for a few days here if you can spare the time."

"This is my holiday, Prince, and I am for once my own master, so I will accept your invitation with great pleasure, but only on condition that you do not alter your accustomed routine of life. Let me remain Mr. Stevens as hitherto, for I think it would be unwise to publish the fact that I am staying here. Of course I must let my Ministers know. Mr. Neville will see to that, and also secure some more suitable apparel, if you will lend him the means to reach Askoff."

"Your Majesty does me much honour," said the old gentleman, who was evidently greatly pleased with the alacrity with which I had accepted his invitation. I have often wondered since whether he had seen how much I enjoyed the company

of the Princess, and whether she had hinted that we might stay if invited.

For two days we lived the ordinary life of the château, and I was as happy as I have ever been. It was all so new to me, for, although there had been my own home-life in England, this was far more intimate than mine had ever been; or perhaps it was simply that now I thought about it, and before I had not. Whatever it was, it made me wish to have a home-life of my own.

I am afraid that I victimised the Princess, for I demanded a great deal of her time. I was greedy for her company, I revelled in the presence of so fair a companion; but all the time, happy though I was, there lurked the question: am I to leave her behind and retain but a memory? I debated this point with myself over and over again: how could I be sure after so short an acquaintance that I really cared for her in the way which to my mind was absolutely necessary? I, myself, was as certain in my heart that I had met my match as I could be of anything, but my brain bade me beware of jumping to a conclusion before deep meditation. I knew that she attracted me physically, that there was a quality in her personality which answered to a similar quality in mine, but I did not know whether I was intoxicated with love or really in love. Was I, with youthful inexperience, mistaking the abstract desire for the reality?

I would try to argue with myself as to my own feelings, and failed dismally more often than not, but I know that I invariably ended my mental researches with the rather naïve question: and what are her feelings in the matter? That would send me down into the depths of despair, and make me wish that I had gone to Sonale, but the next moment I regretted such thoughts, and looked upon them with a feeling of disgust, almost of disloyalty, for how could I surmise the worst before putting the question to the person most concerned?

The third day of our visit dawned, and I do not think it will ever slip from my memory. To begin with, the weather was brilliant, gorgeous warm sunshine even early in the morning, but possessing, thanks to the altitude, just sufficient snap in the air to make one feel that it was good to be alive. I can recall the pleasant, friendly, good-tempered feeling at breakfast that morning, how every one there was as if affected by the sunshine outside, and sparkled naturally, I think most especially this was the case with Sonia, who had evidently had news which delighted her. The Prince gently chaffed her about a letter, and then explained to me that his daughter's fiancé was to be with them for a little while.

I naturally turned to say something appropriate, and noticed that her face wore rather a perturbed expression.

"What is troubling you, Mademoiselle Sonia?"

She blushed faintly, and it was the Princess who answered for her.

"The young officer in question is one of your Majesty's subjects; perhaps, in respect of your incognito, it were as well that he should be stopped."

"One of my officers, is he? That explains the kindness shown to me. Love me, love my king! eh?" I looked at the Princess and noticed a twinkle in her eye. "Perhaps," I continued, "if it will not disturb your plans too much--er--this young officer had better not--had better----" I waited again as though in perplexity.

The Princess smiled, there was a pitiful look on Sonia's face.

"I was only going to suggest that he should see you before he sees me, it will make him less nervous."

Had I been other than a king I firmly believe that Sonia would have called me "Pig," or something equally endearing, especially as her father and the Princess laughed heartily.

I never knew where Mr. Neville vanished to that morning, but soon after breakfast he disappeared, and we did not see him again until lunch. I fancy he wished me to have the opportunity to spend the morning once more alone with the Princess, he knew that I always insisted upon the Prince attending to his affairs as though I was not there as a guest, and he also knew that Sonia would not be likely to be in the way.

It seemed perfectly natural to me when I found myself alone with the Princess, seated beneath a great tree in the garden with nothing to do but enjoy myself; and yet up to these last few days I had had little time in my life for idleness. As a matter of fact, I don't as a rule like to be lazy, but this morning I felt that I should have slain anyone who proposed doing anything. I wanted to be quite slack, with nothing to do but delight in my companion, a frame of mind which I found ridiculously easy to fall into. So there we sat, I am afraid without thought, on my part, of any desire to move that my companion might have had. I was for the time absolutely selfish, and, what is more, I felt as though I exulted in it. I sat and watched the Princess's face; it was well worth it, it was so fascinating with its constant change of expression. Our conversation was for the most part trivial, light and yet interesting, for to know people well, the lighter side of their natures must be studied as well as the more serious, and I was desirous to know all I could about the Princess. Presently I said:

"Tell me about Sonia's fiancé, Princess, do you like him?"

"Very much indeed, he seems to be a splendid fellow and absolutely devoted to Sonia."

"Which is quite understandable."

"What do you wish to know about him?"

"Well, I should like to know his name, and what regiment he belongs to, and anything else which you think might interest me."

"His name is Boris von Landsberg, and he is a lieutenant in a dragoon regiment now quartered in Garace; he is very good-looking."

"So is Sonia, they will make a handsome couple. Is it to be soon?"

"I am afraid not very soon."

"That's a pity; may I ask why?"

"Simply lack of fortune, I believe."

"That's a pity."

"Yes, but you see, although Landsberg is of a very old and distinguished family, it has never been a wealthy one; and Sonia's father has told me quite frankly that his means will not permit of his doing more than help at present."

"I can understand that, as he seems to have a great number of people dependent upon his bounty."

"So they will have to wait, I am afraid."

"It's a pity," I said again.

"I think so, but there are so many cases which seem pitiable to me. However, I have a very finite mind, and so perhaps look at them in the wrong way."

"I fancy we are all inclined to limit our vision, and not seek to discover the lessons to be learnt by adversity."

"That is quite true, but I am afraid it is not the philosophy likely to appeal to lovers, and the two we are speaking of are very fond of each other."

"Something might be done in their case, I hope; at least I will see if it is possible."

"Oh, will you help them?"

"Would you be pleased, Princess?"

"Indeed, yes; for, next to my sisters, I love Sonia."

"Then I must do what I can."

"You *are* good. I don't wonder that you are beloved."

"Blatant flattery, Princess, which makes me blush, a thing which I assure you is extremely bad for me."

"Do you often suffer in that way?"

"Not very; Mr. Neville sees to that."

"What a nice man he is."

"One of the finest characters I have ever met; one of the staunchest friends a man ever had."

"He is devoted to you."

"He must be to have put up with my whims for so many years."

"Have you many?"

"Quite a number."

"Then, be really interesting and tell me some."

"You must be prepared for terrible shocks, now listen: I am romantic, a fatal mishap in a king, one liable to lead him into all sorts of trouble."

"In what way?"

"Well, you know how a king is bound by rules and regulations, some dating

from the stone age. I want to break them all, I want to establish precedents for royalty, such as the right to sneeze without a chamberlain to assist. And then, think of how much might be done to lighten the lives of those royalties who are not in the highest positions; the really worthy members who devote their lives to opening things, I don't mean boxes of sardines or anything like that, but hospitals, exhibitions, etc."

"There is, I am afraid, a certain flippancy in the air this morning; I shall catch it soon, if you continue."

"That would be terrible, Princess. Just imagine, if you can, the feelings of the staid members among my people, how shocked they would be to think that their monarch was ever natural. You see what cause there is for my whims."

"They would write long letters to the papers entitled 'Should Kings be Flip-pant?' or 'Should Kings Smile?'" chimed in my companion.

"And the editor would invite his readers to discuss the matter in his columns, thus supplying himself with copy free of charge; one can see in that the work of an immutable providence, decreeing that nothing in the way of effort shall be wasted."

"And what else would you do to lighten the lot of royalty, besides allowing them to sneeze unaided?"

"There are three heads to my next thought, which I will place in the following order--Life, Death, and Love." I am afraid that I paused a little longer than was absolutely necessary after the last word, then I continued, "To be a really good royal person, it is required that Life should be lived according to the rules and regulations appertaining to that station in life. Now, supposing that three great nobles have the right to pull off your stocking when you retire; that is quite excellent in its way, but there are drawbacks, for instance: for three men to pull at one stocking necessitates the possession of big feet by the king, then----"

"Oh, stop, stop, please! These terrible pictures which you conjure up are most upsetting."

"Very well, let us discuss the next head--Death. Again, there, we see the power of the Press; a royal person must always say something suitable as 'Last Words.' That is the only way in which Grand Opera resembles real life, for, in operatic death scenes, the dying person always sings the most difficult note just as the breath leaves the body."

"You are becoming morbid."

"Then I had better close the discourse, for if I become morbid over death, I--but there, I will not bore you."

"Oh, please, do, I am really interested in your views on life."

"You are not a society reporter by any chance, in disguise, are you?"

"No, but it must be rather a fascinating life, they see so much more beauty

in the world than ever exists."

"How unkind to the ladies."

"Very, but I am waiting for your last--what shall I call it?"

"Well, I described it as 'Head,' but perhaps we might call it 'Heart.'"

"And what have you to say about that?"

"Only that it always seems such a pity that royalty must love to order."

"It would be better, I think, if you said marry to order, for surely love is one of those things which we cannot really control."

"Mr. Neville might know, Princess, he is a walking encyclopædia, but I cannot say, having had no experience."

"How sad, poor King! Has there been no one to touch your heart?"

"Well, once I thought I was really in love, but I was not."

"Dear me, you said that very emphatically."

"Did I? It must be because I am so certain about it."

"Do tell me about it, or would it awaken fond memories best forgotten?"

"I fear that I should become morbid--but there, I might as well tell you, in spite of the fact that I no longer love her; yet the recollection of our last parting makes me always sad. Perhaps you have noticed the streak of melancholy in my nature."

"Of course I have, especially to-day."

"We were torn asunder, a woman came between us----"

"Poor King!" said the Princess, shaking her head sadly. "And what did you do?"

"I rebelled, I fought, I lost my temper, refused to take my food, sobbed in my agony, cried imploringly to those who parted us. Alas, it was of no avail, I was torn by force from her loving arms and deposited in my cot; for I was only three, and my love was the nurse, who had in some way offended my mother."

"I really did not know you could be so facetious, and I think it a shame to work my feelings up to such a pitch, make me ready to weep tears of pity, and then let me down with such a jar; you really might be a modern novelist."

"Well, well, well! what a lot of nonsense we are talking; you will observe that my innate modesty prevents me from taking all the credit."

We interlarded our frivolity with spasms of sensible conversation, and I learnt many things which I had wanted to know, some of which surprised me; one of them was that the Princess had been about to become engaged to that hound Alexis. I thanked God that he was dead, for the mere contemplation of such a thing was insulting to her. She told me that she had not been asked about the matter, that she had been brought up with the idea of marrying him, and that really she had never given the matter serious consideration, as from earliest girlhood she had been told that all marriages were for the good of the State, that

is, all royal marriages. I asked her whether she had any idea whom her father now wished her to marry, and she told me that she did not know, but supposed it would be some grand duke or German princeling. I vowed in my heart that such an appalling fate should not be hers if I could help it, for I knew something of the terrible and stupid etiquette of such Courts: soul-grinding rules and regulations which stamp out individuality and forbid happiness.

I have never been able to discover the use of out-of-date etiquette, and I have always striven to abolish it in my own Court, whenever the reason for its existence was lost in the mist of ages.

To return, however, to my companion and myself. We were enjoying the morning immensely; I make it a plural statement for the simple reason that the Princess told me she was. We were like two children on a holiday, and when I suggested that titles were formal, and that we each knew the other's Christian name, and that cousinship, however remote, allowed the use of them, she agreed, and from then we were "Irma" and "Victor" to each other.

"Irma is a pretty name," I said.

"Victor is a pretty name," mimicking me.

At which we both laughed, for my disgust at having anything pretty about me was apparent.

Presently our host and Sonia joined us, and the conversation grew more serious, and widened considerably. The Prince was interested in a series of experiments he was making with regard to agriculture, and I found his theories more than worthy of being listened to. Mr. Neville joined us, and as usual added his sound views to our discussion; his remarks were always apt, reaching to the core of the question, and his vast store of knowledge almost invariably threw light on some knotty point.

The sound of a galloping horse drew our attention, and I saw that Sonia showed signs of agitation, so surmised correctly that Boris von Landsberg had arrived. Presently the Prince brought him up and presented him to me, and I found that the report I had received did not belie him, for he was a strikingly handsome man, about my own age. He was a trifle confused when presented, and his face seemed vaguely familiar, but it was only later in the day that I recalled where I had met him.

For an hour or two after lunch, we amused ourselves with some rare old books and manuscripts which the Prince had collected. I need hardly say that we had excused Landsberg from such arduous duty.

I took the opportunity, when Mr. Neville had left the room for some reason, to speak to the Prince about Landsberg.

"Prince," I said, "Her Royal Highness has told me something of the facts regarding your daughter's engagement to Landsberg, and I should like, if I knew

that it was your wish, to do what I could to make the union possible."

"It has always been my dearest wish that they should marry, your Majesty, but unfortunately I am so placed, that it is impossible for me to give financial assistance, that is, of course, enough. When matters are settled down, I hope, however, to be able to do so. Landsberg is himself practically dependent upon his pay, with, perhaps, a couple of hundred pounds private income; now, although I am not a snob, I do not wish my only daughter to live in a state of genteel poverty. It may be simply false pride upon my part, but we are an old family, and----"

"Say no more, Prince, I understand perfectly and have only deep respect for such pride; now will you let me confide in you? What I wish to say is this: I myself am bound for state reasons to marry soon; and, with that thought in my head, I would like above all things to have your daughter in my wife's entourage."

"Your Majesty honours me too greatly; my daughter could not be at any Court more noble than yours will be, and I thank your Majesty most sincerely."

"Then you will allow me to make it possible for them to marry?"

"I shall take pride in the fact that my daughter is your Majesty's subject."

"Thank you, Prince, then I must see what I can do."

When we joined the others in the garden, I took Landsberg aside to a quiet corner, where we could talk without interruption, and said:

"I congratulate you, your betrothed is a most charming girl."

"I have the honour to share your Majesty's opinion," he answered.

"It seems to me, though, that as you are only at present a lieutenant your marriage must be postponed for some time."

"Unfortunately that is the case, your Majesty."

"You know I don't approve of officers marrying until they have reached the rank of captain, the majority of them have no time to do anything but learn."

"Yes, your Majesty."

"Now from what I have learned of you, I gather that you love your profession. Am I right?"

"With all my heart."

"H'm! what would Mademoiselle say to that?"

"She is already jealous of my profession, your Majesty."

"Well, well! Now listen to me, Landsberg. You know I am against favouritism in my army, but in my Guards I appoint my own officers; that being so, I intend to offer you a captaincy in that regiment as soon as you have passed the examination for that rank."

He gave a cry of joy, but before he could say anything I continued:

"One minute more before you thank me. A captaincy in the Guards carries with it a certain increase in pay; there are also posts which are generally filled from the Guards, I mean those of military secretaries, they also have the good

side of extra pay to them. I shall appoint you to one which is now vacant, and I think with a little economy you can then marry; I think, too, that you will still have time to do your duty to your wife."

A sob broke from him, and for a moment I feared he would break down, but he recovered himself.

"How can I thank your Majesty? You save my life first, and then add to that by giving me so much."

"Save your life?" I was frankly puzzled.

"I was the officer whom your Majesty carried out of fire near the bridge of Atar."

"I thought your face was familiar, Landsberg, and I am pleased that my efforts were so successful. No, no, don't try to say any more, say all that to Mademoiselle."

He stayed where he was, for I promised to send Sonia to him; so when I regained the others I said to her:

"There is some one at the end of the shrubbery who has something terribly important to say to you, mademoiselle; I think he has found a four-leaved clover or something."

I sat down next to my host.

"Prince, I have lost no time in doing what I promised, as I do not know when I shall be recalled; I have therefore done my best to upset your household arrangements by making Landsberg a captain in my Guards, and one of my military secretaries. This will be confirmed as soon as he has passed his examination, and then, of course, the matter rests with you. Let us walk a little, shall we?"

He was very affected by what he considered the honour and kindness I had shown him, and I thought that out of sight of the others he might recover himself more quickly. I do not think that he had ever had much consideration from his own countrymen, although he had done a great deal for them. He was a splendid nobleman, both by rank and nature.

Having played the part of good fairy to the best of my ability, I once again turned my thoughts to my own affairs, which, strange to say, centred upon the Princess, and I was thinking of her when I rejoined the group in the garden.

I found an extraordinary amount of agitation where I had left the Princess and Mr. Neville talking quietly. Sonia, radiant and tearful, Boris von Landsberg beside himself with joy, Mr. Neville smiling broadly, with his eternal quizzical expression, and the Princess--I don't know how to describe the expression upon her face, it was indefinable, there was joy in it at the others' happiness, yet there was a tinge of sadness there too. She glanced at me as I came up, but I could not read the mystery of that look, I had no skill in reading a woman's thoughts in her eyes.

"I know exactly what you want to say, mademoiselle, but there is no time before tea, and after that we have to dress for dinner, so let us forget about it. No, I mean it--well, there, if you must. Now the other hand is jealous, so you must kiss that, too."

We were a merry party at tea that afternoon, for the joy of the engaged couple was contagious, and none of us were really sober-minded until it was time to dress; then I received a shock, for Mr. Neville came into my room with me.

"Have you enjoyed your day, Victor?" he asked, smiling.

"Immensely, thanks."

"Good! and when did you propose leaving?"

"The day after to-morrow; why?"

"Because there was this from Zeula. I did not give it to you before, not wishing to spoil your day, but he seems to think you are really needed."

I read the letter he handed to me; it was of importance.

"We must leave to-morrow early," I said.

"How shall we travel?"

"We will ride to Ruln, it will be the quickest way."

"Horses?"

"The Prince will lend us some."

"We can do it in a day if we start early and catch the night train. I am sorry, my boy, that your holiday has been spoilt."

"Spoilt? Not a bit, I have enjoyed it tremendously."

"We have not been to Sonale."

"Damn Sonale!"

At which he smiled and left me.

I began my preparations. As a rule, I dress very quickly, but to-night nothing went right; my studs slipped on to the floor in the maddening way which studs have, and could only be discovered after a long and temper-trying search, but the worst offender amongst my garments was my tie; with that I wrestled for a quarter of an hour at least, then I looked at myself in the glass and said out loud, "She may not care for me," which explains my want of success--my mind was concentrated on something else.

Did she care for me? could she care for me? would she care for me? was it possible to make her care for me as I did for her? I knew by then that I was in love. I also knew that I wanted to ask Irma to marry me, and there I stuck and realised that I was afraid.

I tried to tie a neat bow, and failed; again, with the same result; then I tore the offending strip of material off and threw it away from me. I remember feeling grieved that it did not travel far through the air, and, as soon as I realised I felt that about it, my sense of humour came to my rescue, and I roared with laughter

at my own stupidity. Picking up the tie, I tried again with immediate success, so the strip of fabric did grace my royal neck after all.

I asked the Prince whether he could let us have horses early next morning, as I had been recalled, and after having promised them he expressed his sorrow at our departure:

"Loyal Bornian as I am, your Majesty, I have grieved sometimes lately that I was not born a Rudarlian."

"I wish well that it had been so, Prince; but, now that your daughter will be living in Karena, you must look upon it as your second home."

Dinner was not as satisfactory a meal as tea had been; for the life of me I could not frivol as I had done, and Sonia and Landsberg, I fancy, were too happy; the other three did nobly, however. When the Prince asked me how far we expected to get the next day, I said as far as Ruln, and looked instinctively at the Princess. I don't know what I hoped, perhaps that she would give some sign of her feelings, but she only looked up swiftly and said:

"Are you leaving us then?"

"Yes," I answered cheerfully, although my heart had sunk to my boots. "You see I am not allowed too long a holiday, for fear that I should get lost."

"I am sorry, I was going to propose a ride to Shesaks Towers to-morrow."

"I'm afraid that must be a pleasure deferred, Princess."

"For how long, until you are too old to climb properly?"

She smiled her question, and my heart went right through the floor; but I managed to answer her smile and say lightly:

"I hope before then, in fact I am thinking of asking Landsberg to take my place and let me have his."

"God forbid, your Majesty," said that young man, looking at Sonia.

"Oh, I don't mean now, Landsberg."

A remark which caused laughter and enabled me to recover; it also changed the subject.

I own to being small-minded and ridiculous, but I felt piqued at the apparent indifference with which Irma greeted the news of our departure, and so, to add to my folly, instead of going into the garden after dinner, I proposed a game of billiards to the Prince, and he, thinking no doubt that I meant it, fell in with the suggestion, so that instead of spending my last evening in the company of Irma, a good deal of it was spent knocking silly ivory or bonzoline balls about with a silly piece of wood.

Mr. Neville came in after we had played for some time, and remarked that it was a most lovely night, that it was as fine a moon as we had had that year, or something like that. Every remark was a hint that we had played long enough, but I refused to see, or pay any attention, until at last he said:

"We shall have to say good-bye to-night, as we are starting so early."

Only then did I realise what an ill-tempered cub I was; and, when the game ended, proposed we should join the others.

However, the Prince excused himself, as it was later than usual, so I went out by myself. I saw no one on the terrace where we generally sat, so concluded that they had gone down the garden, and was about to follow and try to find them, when a voice said:

"Well, Victor, who won?"

I turned quickly, and there was the Princess seated in a big arm-chair, in the shadow of a trailing mass of jasmine and roses which hung over the terrace.

She was alone, so I drew up another chair beside hers.

"You see I have come to bore you again, Irma," I said lightly.

"I wonder?" she answered, and then continued, "Did you have some good games?"

"Very." I added "Liar" under my breath.

"Isn't it a perfectly gorgeous night? Even I feel less prosaic under such a moon."

"You are not prosaic, are you?"

"Good gracious me, yes, I have no chance of being anything else, and am not sure that I could be if I tried ever so hard."

"Nonsense."

"I assure you it isn't. I wish it were, for then I could dream all kinds of lovely things, instead of thinking about my meals and clothes."

I felt suddenly chilled, without any reason that I knew of, save the fact that I could not seem to get into touch with this mood of hers. It was a few minutes before I essayed another remark.

"I wonder when we shall meet again."

"Oh, we are sure to meet somewhere some day, people always do, it is such a small world really. I wish you could come to Sonale, I'm sure you would find a great deal to interest you, and I know you would like my sisters."

"I'm sure I should."

I did not put much fervour into my voice; and Irma evidently noticed it, for she turned the subject.

"What time do you leave to-morrow, Victor?"

"We are starting about four, it will be light by then, and I hate riding a horse hard."

Another pause, and then:

"You are very brave, aren't you, Victor?"

"Good Lord, no! Why?"

"Landsberg told us how you saved his life."

"The deuce he did! well, I must warn him not to tell anyone else, and I hope you will keep it dark."

"Of course if you wish it, but why so modest?"

"I'm not particularly so, but what I did was nothing much really, and it was in the heat of action."

"According to Boris, it was something very brave."

"Dangerous perhaps; but, as I did not realise the danger at the time, there is so much the less credit."

"Well, I think it was very brave."

"That is kind of you, Irma."

"I want to thank you for what you are doing for Sonia and Boris von Landsberg; she has confided to me that she will have to live in Karena."

"I hope she will be happy there, when I am married the Court will be gayer."

"Oh, I do congratulate you, I had heard nothing of your engagement."

She held out her hand, and laughed merrily.

"Oh, it isn't settled yet," said I lamely, and subsided into silence.

I felt terribly unhappy and cold, all my joy of the day had vanished and I sat among the ruins of the edifice of love which I had built up; it was as if something had blotted out the moon and plunged me into darkness. Her delight at the thought of my being engaged had done it; now I knew that she did not care, and I was miserable.

The laughter of Sonia and Landsberg, as they walked up the path towards the house, drew our attention and put a stop to any chance there might have been for me to get back to a normal condition. As it was, we soon parted for the night, nay more, for we should not see them on the morrow.

As I shook hands with the Princess, I reddened underneath my skin with the effort that I had to make to prevent myself taking her in my arms before them all, and proclaiming aloud that I loved her better than all the world. Poor little King, with all your power, with all your pride, you were a pitiable coward before the bright eyes of the girl you loved; and deserved to be miserable.

What a terrible night I spent; hours of restless tossing in a comfortable bed, hours of self-reproach, and despair, until at last I fell asleep.

Mr. Neville and I, after a hasty breakfast and an almost affectionate goodbye to our host, who had turned out to bid us farewell, rode away from the château. As we passed the wing in which the Princess had her apartments, I looked up at the windows, and hugged myself with joy to see a hand wave us a last greeting, and hear a sweet voice call out:

"Bon voyage!"

CHAPTER XVII

My joy, however, was transitory. That Irma should have taken the trouble to wave to us at that hour in the morning, was little more than a friendly act, although at first I had thought differently. My companion and I rode in silence; he never asked questions of a personal nature, although he was as curious as the best of us. At any rate we rode along without exchanging a word.

I left the route to him as I knew he would have worked it out before starting. Ideal companion, he let me ride along quietly, never disturbing my train of thoughts, except to say "right," or "left," as the case might be. At first, after the faint flush of joy at Irma's friendly adieu, I grew more and more despondent, and held to my villainous bad temper for a long time, but presently I began to look at things with a clearer vision, perhaps on account of the beauty of the day and the exercise. I began to see what an ass I had been and was, to have come away without giving the Princess an inkling of my feelings towards her.

I went over the conversations we had had together, and realised that nothing I had said could have conveyed in the slightest degree the fact that I was head over ears in love with her. What had I expected? Evidently that she would read my unspoken thoughts, and immediately throw herself at me, and say, "Victor, I love you." The absurdity of the idea caused me suddenly to roar with laughter, much to Mr. Neville's relief, for he turned to me with his quizzical smile and said:

"You are a nice, cheerful companion, Victor."

"I am a particular kind of damned fool."

"In this instance, yes, but we are more to blame than you are, for it ought to have been part of your education to have had numerous experiences of a similar nature. But still, I don't think there is anything to worry about, you will do better with the next one."

"There isn't going to be a next one," I said, almost fiercely.

"I did not suppose there was," he replied, smiling to himself.

Once more I was cheerful, and we talked of many things, laughing and jesting as we had all through our tour. In my heart, however, there ran a refrain which filled me with contentment: "I shall see her again, I shall see her again," it even seemed to adapt itself to the sound of our horses' feet.

I shall see her again, ran the refrain; but I did not know then how soon it would be.

It was good to be back in Karena again, there was such a friendly feeling there; even the early hour of our arrival did not prevent a small crowd assembling to do me honour. I think to be loved is the nearest approach to divine happiness that a man can experience in this funny old world of ours, especially when he is capable of returning the affection. This was so in my case; I really loved all my people, down to the dirtiest ragged urchin.

It made me feel very proud to think of these good citizens being so ready to wait and wait, just for the sake of seeing me flash by in my car, and I hope that I shall never lose the feeling, for it seems to me that such pride can do no man any harm, unless he is untrue to himself, in order to retain the outward show of his peoples' affection.

Apart, too, from the consideration that I have mentioned, Karena itself was such a pleasant city; it was unexpected, full of surprising bits of architecture, quaint mediæval roofs full of colour, the slabs of stone seemed to retain the sunshine, and glowed merrily as one went by. I do not believe that I ever felt this more vividly than I did that day, but then perhaps there was sunshine in my heart, for had I not come to the conclusion that I was an unmitigated ass? I can imagine circumstances when to arrive at such a conclusion might not give satisfaction, but, as it was, I was happy about it.

My behaviour that day, I was told, was distinctly unkinglike. It was Prince Zeula who imparted this information, and the reason for it was that I persisted in calling him "Mr. Smith," and playing little jokes upon him, childish fun, such as hiding his pen, and purloining his glasses. My mother, too, declared that I was absolutely boisterous, on account of the heartiness of my kisses, but, as all her dear face was beaming with delight at my return, I did not worry about it.

That evening Prince Zeula took Mr. Neville off to dine with him; I knew what that meant. I remained with my mother at her request; I knew what that meant, too.

We sat out on a balcony overlooking the gardens, beautifully peaceful and quiet save for the faint hum of the traffic passing the Palace. My mother sat without saying a word, and I wondered how long her patience would last, as I knew that she was terribly anxious to know about our trip, that is, the really interesting part. It was in keeping with the mischievous mood I had been in all day that I religiously refrained from mentioning Irma, until at last she said:

"And how did you like the Princess?"

"Oh, she is a charming girl," I said lightly.

"So I have heard; it is a pity that your proposed visit to Sonale was interfered with."

"It was; but Zeula had good reasons for recalling us."

"He generally has good reasons for everything, hasn't he?"

This astonishing mother of mine then began to talk of other things, a proceeding which upset my calculations, for I had intended to make her more and more curious. It was disturbing to find that she did not appear to take any more interest in the Princess, especially as I was dying to tell her all about my feelings in the matter. In vain I tried to reopen the subject, but no, it was unavailing, and at length I was obliged to capitulate, and say:

"The Princess is an awfully nice girl." Which afterwards I thought particularly tame.

"Yes?"

Oh, the dampening effect of that monosyllable. I seemed to shrivel up inside, and then I chanced to glance at my mother's face. There was a faint, quizzical smile upon her lips, as she bent forward to look into the lighted room at her side.

"Well, of all the artful women!" I shook my finger at her severely.

"What is the matter, Victor?"

"I do believe that you have been fooling me."

"Did you take me for a stupid woman?"

I went across and knelt at her side; she ran her fingers through my hair.

"Mother dear, she is the sweetest girl in all the world."

"And?"

"I love her so much."

"And she?"

"I don't know."

"What?"

"I don't know, I did not ask her."

"Why not?"

"I don't know, I think I was too scared."

"Of what?"

"That she might say 'no.'"

My mother gave a little laugh.

"I don't think you need have been afraid, my boy."

"But mother dear, she seemed so pleased to hear that I was engaged; of course she misunderstood me."

"Tell me about it."

I related what had happened, for every word was engraved upon my memory, and when I had finished I said:

"So you see, mother, that I couldn't say anything then, could I?"

"Of course not, my boy; but I am quite sure now that you need not have been afraid."

"Do you really think so, mother, or are you saying that to soothe me?"

"I really mean it, dear."

"I was an ass, wasn't I?"

"No, my boy, for how should you have known the workings of a woman's mind?"

And, when I thought of it, how could I?

* * * * *

Some two weeks after our return, when the business I had been recalled for was completed, I spoke to Woolgast concerning Landsberg's appointment to the Guards.

"I am thinking--no, in fact I have promised a young officer of my acquaintance the vacant captaincy in the Guards. His name is Landsberg, do you know him?"

"Is his Christian name Boris, your Majesty?"

"Yes."

"I have known him since childhood; my sister married his cousin."

"Did you know of his engagement?"

"Yes, your Majesty."

"And the obstacles in their way?"

"Yes, your Majesty."

"Do you like the young man?"

"He is a great favourite of mine, your Majesty."

"Then why did you not mention his name to me when I asked your opinion the other day about the appointment?"

"Your Majesty has done so much for me that I could not ask favours."

I looked at him for a minute; he had astonished me, that a man could and yet did not. I fear there are few in the world like him.

"Very well, General, I shall not forget. Landsberg has the appointment, also the secretaryship which is vacant."

He thanked me gravely and was about to depart, when I called him back.

"I was going to tell you something, General, but I think I had better wait a little while yet. I hope you will be properly curious."

"If your Majesty finds that I fail in my duty, it will be through curiosity."

It was some two or three weeks after Captain von Landsberg first took duty at the Palace that, when returning to my study one afternoon, I met him hurrying towards me. His face showed plainly that he was extremely upset, and angry. I stopped him, and asked whether there was anything the matter.

"I have just been seeking an audience with your Majesty."

"Then come with me now."

He followed me in silence, and I could almost feel his wrath as a physical body. I felt that something really serious must have occurred to upset him so completely, so once we were in my room I bade him sit down in order to recover himself better, whilst I turned away to sort some papers.

"Well, Landsberg, what has upset you, and in what way can I assist you?"

"I came to ask your Majesty for leave of absence."

I raised my eyebrows. This was quick work, considering that he had only joined such a short while.

"I feel sure you have good reasons for your demand; are they of such a nature that you can confide in me?"

"Yes, your Majesty, I wish for leave of absence to punish a man who has grossly insulted a lady who cannot retaliate."

"I can have no duels in Rudarlia."

"Your Majesty, the man I would punish is a Bornian, or rather he lives in that country."

"No officer in my Guards must be mixed up in any scandal, Landsberg."

"I assure your Majesty there shall be no scandal, no one will know my name or anything about me, and----"

"There is only one lady whose wrongs you have a right to redress. Is Made-moiselle Sonia the lady in question?"

"No, your Majesty."

"No member of your family?"

"No, your Majesty, but it is a lady whom I revere, and too highly placed to take notice of the insult."

I frowned, what he had said puzzled me. Too highly placed? Of no one less than Royalty could that be said. I began to get cold, how many Royal persons in Bornia did Landsberg know?

"You must tell me the name of the lady, for she is evidently Royal, and surely you do not know many of the Royalty of Bornia."

"No, your Majesty."

"How many do you know?"

"One, your Majesty."

I grew colder, and then hot in a quick flush of burning rage: some one had insulted my Princess.

"You may tell me about it, Landsberg."

Something in my voice must have startled him, for he looked up sharply, and hesitated.

"Tell me," I said again.

"It is Princess Irma, your Majesty."

"How was she insulted and by whom?"

"In an article in a paper, may I give it to your Majesty to read?"

"Have you it with you?"

"It is here, your Majesty."

He pulled a paper from the front of his tunic and handed it to me.

I turned aside to one of the windows and read. It was just one of those filthy articles which hint at scandalous behaviour; articles that are far more injurious than outspoken libel. There was nothing which could be shown up as untrue, but a number of vague hints at scandal which so many people gloat over, and remember to regale their friends with. The kind of article that causes the sales manager of a paper to rub his hands gleefully.

I read the thing twice; and, by that time, I was in such a rage that had the writer been in the room I should have tried to kill him.

I thought rapidly of the best course to pursue, but I cannot say whether I decided upon it or not; however, I was determined that the swine who wrote it should not escape scot free. I turned to Landsberg, and I think my face must have scared him, for he stammered out something about being sorry to have distressed me.

"Distressed me? Why, Landsberg, if you had not taken notice of this, I think I should have cancelled your commission. Now listen to me: the writer of this is going to be punished, you understand."

"Your Majesty then gives me leave."

"No, not for the purpose you think, but to accompany me."

"Your Majesty?"

"You will come to Sonale with me."

"Yes, your Majesty."

I saw his eyes gleam.

"It is I who am going to chastise this fellow, not you, but I must be disguised; you will see to that, just a beard and a few lines to add to my age. You will give orders to have a powerful car ready to-night, at the side entrance. Tell no one of what you know. I will inform the necessary people."

"And the chauffeur, your Majesty?"

"I will drive, and Bauen will accompany us. You will, of course, be in mufti, without any mark by which you could be recognised."

"Yes; at what hour shall I await your Majesty?"

"You may come here at a quarter-past ten, the car must be ready at the half-hour."

I sent for Zeula. He noticed my agitation the moment he entered, and I told him as quietly as I could of my proposed trip. He was amazed, horrified, pleading; and then, as he saw that my mind was absolutely made up, he gave in. I believe

in his heart of hearts he would have liked to accompany me himself. He put no more obstacles in my way, and even thought of things which I had forgotten. He reminded me that I had better take my passport made out in the name of Stevens, supplied me with a good sum of money, in case of necessity, and finally left me. I think he saw I wished to be alone.

I read the article for the third time, and then locked it in my desk, I was in a mood quite dangerous enough, without adding fuel to it. I could have cried with rage that anyone should even hint at such things. I must be careful; the world must never know that the King of Rudarlia had done what I proposed to do. This was not for my own sake but for Irma's. Irma must never know, at least until we were engaged. I could not let her suppose that I had chastised this man in order to gain her gratitude.

Should I make an effort to see her when once in Sonale? I had not made up my mind, and yet, if possible, it would be a good opportunity for me to ask the question, the answer to which I was longing to hear. Since my interview with my mother I had lost the fear of a refusal, for I had determined to win her, even though at first it should appear against her will.

I do not know how the time passed until the evening came, but somehow it did. I had desired that Mr. Neville should come to me, but he could not be found, which annoyed me, for I wished to confide in him.

A small parcel had been given to me, which contained the necessary disguise, and at the time appointed Captain von Landsberg appeared.

"Help me with this," I said, holding out a stick of paint.

He dexterously made a few lines on my face, which, though hardly noticeable, added years to my age; he also assisted me to fix on the beard, which was small and pointed. I looked at myself in a mirror: the effect was all that I desired.

In ten minutes we were on our way. At six o'clock we drew up in front of a small hotel in Sonale.

We engaged a room in which to breakfast, and wait until the morning was more advanced. I doubt if I had exchanged more than three remarks with my companion; now, however, I said:

"I want you to go and find out just where the office of the paper is, and any other information you care to gather, such as the name of the editor, and what time he generally arrives, then return here."

I sat down by the open window to await his return, and my thoughts were pretty busy. I recalled the drive through the night, hour after hour; the great headlight of the motor, shining first on one thing then on another, the straying cows which had so nearly caused a mishap, the luck of finding an intelligent peasant when we lost our way; he was well rewarded for being hauled out in the middle of the night, and I daresay wished that more people would lose their way. The

amazement of the frontier guard at the mad English motorist, the puncture which caused delay, and finally the hotel where I now sat and waited. Then my thoughts switched on to Sonale; it seemed so strange that I should be here in the Bornian capital, in the same place where Irma lived. I wished that I had asked Landsberg to find out the way to the Palace, and the next moment was pleased that I hadn't. I wondered whether it would be possible to obtain audience with the Princess without allowing my identity to become known. I might do it through Sonia, I had no doubt that she could get the Princess to her rooms under some pretext, that is, if Irma did not wish to see me in her own, for of course I did not want to hide my identity from her, only from strangers. Then I became impatient with waiting, and walked up and down the room, glancing every few minutes at my watch. Half-past nine, ten, and still he had not returned. I sincerely hoped that nothing had happened to Landsberg. At about a quarter-past he came in, with a strange expression on his face.

"Well, I have been all impatience for your arrival."

"I have found out what your Majesty wishes to know, and more."

"More?"

"Yes, your Majesty, the man who wrote the article will not be at work for some time."

"What, isn't he in Sonale?"

"He is, your Majesty, but we are too late, some one has already done what we came to do."

"Damnation! But who?"

"No one knows, your Majesty, but the fellow received a most unmerciful thrashing, and will certainly write no more articles of a similar kind; he had to be carried home, they told me."

"I must know who did it, so that I can thank him, although I envy him the doing of it; but you and I, Landsberg, are not wanted, we had better get back to Karena."

"Yes, your Majesty."

He looked as though he did not agree with me, and it flashed across me that he had hoped to catch a glimpse of his betrothed, but I was in no mood to be unselfish; since I could not do what I had come to do, and since I could not think of any way to see the Princess, I wished to get away from Sonale as quickly as possible. I looked at him, he stared straight in front, without moving a muscle of his face, bearing his disappointment like the very gallant gentleman he was, and incidentally setting an example to me, his King.

"I shall leave here at one o'clock," I said. "Until then, you had better do some shopping, and obtain what no other city in the world can give you at the present time. Go, don't waste time, and try to be back punctually; tell them to send me up

the papers."

"I thank your Majesty most gratefully."

His face was all smiles, and I felt pleased that some one should benefit by our trip.

I tried very hard to make myself believe that I was pleased that the fellow had been punished, but I could not get over the desire I had had to send my fist smashing into his face. However, I realised that the chivalry of some man had taken the matter out of my hands, and that I must wait patiently, reading the newspapers, until that lucky young devil of a Guardsman had finished making love and returned to his King.

Having read the papers, I set about for some method of amusing, or rather boring myself, and commenced to whistle somewhat mournfully all the airs I could recollect; when I hit upon one more than usually lugubrious, I repeated it several times, much to my satisfaction. I remember that the English song, entitled "Three fishers went sailing out into the west," was the one which I finally selected as the most suitable to fit my mood, and gloried in making it as miserable as possible.

With no hope in my heart that the time would pass quickly, I smoked and yawned, yawned and smoked, until twelve o'clock.

The door opened and Landsberg appeared.

"There is a lady who wishes to speak to your Majesty."

"The devil!"

I meant to say this under my breath, but I must have spoken louder than I intended, for the lady of whom Landsberg had spoken heard it, and laughed merrily.

"No, Victor, only me."

She threw back the veil which covered her face. I sprang to my feet, and tossed my cigar, as I thought, into the fire-place, but it fell short on the carpet, and smoked merrily, a fact which I did not notice, for I had eyes for nothing but the face of my darling.

Landsberg had decently left the room.

I was so surprised that I could only hold her hands and look at her, and at length her eyes fell before the light in mine. I did not know that I still held her hands.

"Princess, oh, Princess."

"Victor, oh, Victor." The little witch had hypnotised me, and then was graceless enough to mock at me.

"Irma, I love you, I love you."

She gave a little start and I felt her hands tremble; I saw a new look come into her eyes, rather startled, and shy.

"Victor, what are you saying?"

"Oh, I know what I say, have known it for all the time that has passed since I saw you last. I love you, and I want you to say that you will try to love me. Irma, my beautiful Irma, will you try?"

"Are you sure you want me, are you sure it is not mere liking, are you sure, oh, Victor, are you sure?" There was a little break in her voice.

"Am I sure? Yes, I am, I love you so much that the mere thought of you makes me happy. Irma, I never thought it possible until I met you that God could be so kind, and yet He has been very good to me, everything has prospered with me, but I would sooner be a peasant, with you, than reign where I do without you. I can't live without you, I love you so."

"What do you want me to say?" she said, so softly that only my lover's ears could have caught the words.

"Say you love me a little, my darling."

"It would hardly be true, Victor, for I love you with my whole heart."

* * * * *

It would seem like sacrilege to write of the next quarter of an hour, even if I could remember what was said, which I cannot; there remains to me but a confused memory, yet one of the gladdest of all that I possess. All that I can say is, that I knew I had received a priceless gift in her love, and gloried that mine for her was as deep and passionate.

"You are rather astonishing, Victor."

Her words brought me back to everyday existence, and I began to laugh, lightly at first and rather uncertainly, until she joined in, and we sat like two foolish people, and laughed until we cried. But an end must come to even the heartiest laughter, and when I had wiped the tears from my eyes, I answered her remark:

"Why am I astonishing?"

"Isn't it rather unusual--your mode of procedure, I mean?"

"It is none the worse for that, but I suppose it might strike a casual observer as rather strange."

"I think it would," she said.

She began to laugh again, but so tremulously that I put my arm round her and held her tight; her head went down on to my shoulder and she cried. For a moment I thought to ask her what was the matter, but my innate prudence made me keep silent, and after a minute or two she looked up, smiling through her tears.

"I am so silly, but I am so happy."

"So am I."

I should imagine that I looked it, for my face was one big smile. It was so very extraordinary, I had been absolutely afraid at the château, whereas now I felt as brave as a lion.

"How did you know I was here?" It had only just struck me that I had not told Landsberg not to mention the fact.

"Sonia told me, of course."

"I must make Landsberg a General."

"You know Sonia is outside?"

"No, I didn't, but it is an excellent place for a little while yet. Now tell me why you came, was it because you thought I should feel lonely?"

"No, dear, it was not for that, but to thank you."

"Whatever for?"

"For what you were here for. No, you must not blame Landsberg, Sonia got it out of him. She made him tell her, and I am so glad she did, for I could never have come unless I had had that as a reason."

"Couldn't you have thought of one for yourself?"

"Oh, yes," she said teasingly, "I could have come and asked you to marry me."

"I have not asked you yet, now I come to think of it, so will repair the fault, if you please."

"Go down properly on your knees then."

I did as she bade me, and she put her hands one on each side of my face, and held me fast.

"Didn't you know I loved you, Victor?"

"No, my darling, how could I? Why, when I left you the other day, I thought you were absolutely indifferent."

"Then why did you carry me off my feet to-day?"

"Because I felt braver, and wanted you so much, that the sight of you made me forget all considerations, made me forget everything except the one fact, that I loved you."

"I never thought that I should be proposed to in a scrubby little hotel by a King. My imagination could not carry me as far as that, but I shouldn't have minded if it had been a pigsty."

I daresay the wonder of it all would have given us food for conversation for a week, only Landsberg and Sonia were outside. Perhaps they were impatient at our long interview, and thought that, as I happened to be a reigning monarch, I had better get back to my own country, so one of them--I never discovered who--gave a discreet knock at the door. The next moment Irma and I were far apart. A monarch has no right to feel foolish before one of his subjects--it is a bad precedent to establish--but I found it extremely difficult to keep a stern expression when the two entered; that is the worst of kingship, you can never be natural except

with your equals. I should have liked to tell all the world that Irma loved me, it was the supreme and only important thing in the world. As it was, after a few commonplaces, I sent Landsberg to see if the car was ready; and when he had vanished said to Sonia:

"Mademoiselle, I wish for your congratulations. Her Royal Highness has consented to be my wife. I do not think there is any necessity to mention the fact to Landsberg, although I should not be astonished to hear that the rascal would not be surprised, if told."

"Your Majesty has my most humble congratulations, and I am sure Landsberg would be surprised, if he knew that your Majesty wished it."

While the would-be surprised Captain was still out of the room, I said good-bye to the Princess, my Irma.

VICTOR VICTORIOUS

CHAPTER XVIII

Captain von Landsberg and I set off on our return journey. His face was as solemn as that of a judge, or as that of a judge should be, for most of the judges I have known are generally more than willing to see humour in situations.

Of course it was quite right of him not to show any amusement at the fact that his King was only a mortal, with the ordinary tendencies of mankind, and I have no doubt that writers of books on etiquette would commend him most highly; but I wished that he had been Mr. Neville or Prince Zeula, for then I could have poured out my soul, and incidentally bored them horribly.

I wished to speak of my Princess, to rave over her perfections, to force them to see her as I saw her, to feel indignant if they did not. I wished them to be there and agree with every wild statement I made, although all the time I should have known they were laughing at me, and probably saying to themselves, "Lord, how funny the boy is! does he imagine that he is the only one who has been in love?"

I daresay, if the truth could be known, Landsberg regarded me as the staidest lover of his experience, for I sat staring straight in front of me, hardly smiling, and only addressing a few remarks to him, and those about such things as crops, cows, or cabbages. He would have changed his opinion had he but known the wild exhilaration that I felt surge over me from time to time, and the rose-tinted veil which hung over those very ordinary subjects of conversation.

We had gone a considerable way before I broached the subject of the punishment meted out to the writer of the scurrilous article.

I asked him whether he had any idea of the executioner; but he assured me that all his questions had given him no hint, and he supposed that among the Bornians there had been some man who had had the necessary vigour to carry out the chastisement.

As this was the most probable theory, I let the matter stay there without any wild surmises; but I felt that I should very much have liked to know who had done it, so that I could in some way reward him.

As soon as we had got a few miles into Rudarlia, I removed the beard which I had been wearing, and was glad to get rid of it.

It was dark when we reached the Palace; and, after warning my companion not to mention our trip, I slipped up to my own quarters, where I delivered myself into my valet's hands. In about an hour I was closeted with my mother.

First I told her of the article, then about my idea of punishing the writer, at which she implored me not to, and was only relieved by my promising to take no steps in the matter. Then I told her that I was engaged to be married to Irma. Her astonishment was so great that I had to tell her everything, much to my amusement, for she had not known that I had left the Palace.

After my mother, I had to send for Prince Zeula, and have it all out with him. He was so delighted that I feared evil consequences to his health, and told him so; I believe if he had had his way he would have ordered bonfires and fireworks.

Lastly I went to Mr. Neville's room, where I knew I should find him engrossed in the work of some mighty brain. As I expected, he was there, seated in his favourite chair, sucking at a favourite briar, and reading hard. I noticed that his hand was slightly bandaged, so after our usual salutations I said:

"What is the matter with your hand?"

"Nothing much, I knocked some skin off it, and slightly strained one of my fingers."

"How did you do that?"

"I hit it against something."

"I'm sorry; but look here, can you spare me a few minutes? You will have to whether you like it or not, so put that beastly, musty old book down."

He did as I wished, and I sat down near him, filled my own pipe, and remained silent.

He went on puffing, waiting for me to tell him what I wished to; he knew that it was no good trying to hurry me, and that I should speak as soon as I was ready, I do not know why, but it took me some little time to formulate my sentences; and, when I had, I did not use them, but blurted out instead:

"I saw Princess Irma to-day. We are going to be married."

"I'm glad, and congratulate you, Victor. Now tell me about it."

Then I began to be eloquent, and poured out all those things I had wished to say while returning from Sonale. Dear old fellow, he listened intently just as I had imagined him doing, but his face showed how pleased he was. I explained for the third time that evening just how it had occurred, and he said that he had only disgust for the offence, dismay at my proposed punishment of it, and satisfaction at the ultimate result. I believe, had he given me the slightest opening, that I should have gone all over my feelings again; but luckily for him he did not, only suggesting that as I had had a strenuous day, I had better get some sleep before morning. His congratulations were so genuine that, as I said good night, I could not refrain from saying:

"Don't you think I am an infernally lucky chap?"

"I do, every man is who secures a really charming and good woman as a wife, but I think Her Royal Highness is rather lucky too."

A remark which I deprecated, although it was comforting, especially as it came from Mr. Neville, for he did not as a rule pay me compliments. Honestly, however, I think my pleasure was more for Irma's sake than for any personal pride I may have had.

So I went away from my old tutor quite pleased with everything. All the three people who had given me so much were delighted; and I was to become the husband of the sweetest woman in the world. It was hardly wonderful therefore that I slept like an angel, by which I mean that I was blest.

I think I was nearer becoming chronically bad-tempered during the next few months than at any other time in my life. It was so ridiculous that I should be kept waiting for my bride for so long. I cursed etiquette of every description, and regretted that I was not living in the middle ages, when I could have carried her off immediately, or as immediately as the force I had at my disposal would allow. I made myself objectionable to nearly everybody, although they did not tell me so. However, as the time went on, I began to get a bit calmer, and turned my thoughts to a state of things which should have received attention before; I thoroughly overhauled the Palace, and was almost dismayed to find how much there was that required immediate alteration.

There were whole suites of rooms that I could not bear the thought of Irma ever seeing, they were so badly decorated. I do not know whether Ivan had been responsible for the mural atrocities, the terrible colour schemes, but I do know that some one without any taste at all had really desecrated the Palace. Perhaps it was one of Ivan's lady friends. Having come to the conclusion that this state of things must be altered just as rapidly as possible, I sought the most capable architect in Karena, and entrusted the job to him; but I made it plain that all plans must be submitted to me before any work was done.

To avoid the danger of having everything too masculine in taste, I organised a committee, which consisted of my mother and Ivan's wife, who, I am glad to say, was at last happy, and with whom my mother had become very friendly. Sometimes, as a great honour, Zeula was allowed to suggest some decorative scheme. All this was really quite unnecessary, but it was an amusement, and rather out of the ordinary Royal pursuits.

Some two months after my return from Sonale--that wonderful trip with Landsberg--I was present at the wedding of Sonia. It was a function of some magnitude, for all the nobility of Rudarlia who were not in some way related to Landsberg knew that I was interested in the wedding, and that it would be rather a cheerful and sumptuous gathering. Therefore they came, nor, I understand, were they disappointed. In fact, so large was the crowd that I began to wonder whether my own marriage, when it took place, would attract as much notice. I believe that I mentioned my thoughts to Woolgast. He looked astonished, until I suggested that I should have to take a commission in my own regiment of Guards, and then, of course, he perceived that I had been jesting. He was a serious man, whom I often teased.

My mother took a great liking to the bride; and, when the couple returned from their honeymoon, she often had her to her room.

I therefore, myself, saw a good deal of the young wife, who was always ready to talk about Irma, and from her I learnt much regarding the tastes of my future wife.

There was one room in the apartments set aside for Irma which I determined to have decorated entirely according to my own fancy; and once this was decided upon I set to work to gather together those things which might best carry out my idea. From Sonia I learnt that a very favourite period of art, with Irma, was the eighteenth century French school, so I set about obtaining as many rare and beautiful specimens of that period as possible. I was fortunate enough to secure some gems, although I had to pay very heavily for them; but, when I saw them in the spaces and places allotted to them, I thought they were worth it. The room, when finished, surpassed my expectations, and I used to dream of the day when Irma would sit there and admire some beautiful painting, or fondle some charming bit of china.

I am afraid that I might have neglected my customary routine, had I been left to myself, but in Zeula and Mr. Neville I possessed two guardians who were quite capable of standing me in a corner if I did not do my kingly duty. I used to wonder sometimes whether love was changing me into a slothful person, I so often felt averse to doing many things which before I had accepted without murmuring. Mr. Neville used to gibe at me without mercy, but his crowning insult was when he called me "Romeo"; that caused a most unkingly tussle, in which I am loath

to say Victor II. of Rudarlia won by very little: my old tutor was astonishingly tough.

Zeula, who was present, laughed like a schoolboy; and I am convinced, had anyone seen us, every single subject of mine would have heard the rumour that their King had gone mad.

But even waiting comes to an end, and the day dawned when Irma and I became one. I do not believe that two souls have ever fused more completely into one than hers and mine.

My wife and I rarely mention the day of our marriage, for the reason that, although it was the beginning of our married life, something happened which was so tragic, so unlooked for, that even the retrospect is disquieting and leading to melancholy.

With all the pomp which attends the public marriage of Royalty, Irma and I had said those words which made us man and wife, and in front of us stretched all-alluring vistas of life.

We were driving away from the Cathedral, where the ceremony had been held, in an open carriage--for neither of us wished to cheat the cheering multitudes of their lawful rights--and as we passed along the gaily decorated streets, under wonderful flag and flower effects, through the dense masses of people, who were almost crazy with loyalty and delight, I remember pressing Irma's hand in encouragement. This was no mean ordeal which we were going through, especially for her, as after all she was an alien, of a race which so shortly before had been hostile.

Those splendid people of mine, they did not allow her to perceive that she was a stranger to them, but shouted, "God save the Queen!" with all their might, which was certainly great.

Once she turned to me and said:

"Oh, Victor, what dears they are, I know I shall love them all."

And there was I, laughing and bowing, and feeling, if it can be believed, extremely wise, and not a bit of a fool.

I felt pleased that the marriage had been delayed by etiquette, for it had given my subjects time to become used to the idea of having a Bornian Princess for their Queen. It is quite safe to say that we were both supremely happy, a feeling which seemed to be universal. And yet there was one man in the crowd to whom my kingship was hateful, that is the only reason I can assign for his action.

We had reached a street narrower than the others which we had passed through, for we had extended our return from the Cathedral so that as many people as possible might see us, and when for one moment we slackened our pace on account of the terrific crowd--which was almost more than the police and troops could manage to restrain--a man suddenly raised his arm and hurled

a bomb at us. I did not see the movement myself, as I was looking the other way; but Irma did, and threw herself in front of me to offer her body as a shield for me. Luckily it missed us both, for it was ill-aimed, and, passing right over the carriage, struck and burst.

There was a terrible explosion, and for a moment I could not think what had happened, for the wheels of our carriage were smashed, and this caused us to bump heavily on the ground, a motion that shook us both considerably. I clambered to my feet stricken suddenly with appalling rage; had the man who was responsible been near, I am convinced that I should have choked him to death. Perhaps, poor brute, it would have been better for him; for, as I glared round, the crowd fell on the would-be assassin, and literally tore him to pieces.

The soldiers and police were powerless, but I am glad to say the cries of anger drowned those more ghastly to listen to. As it was, I did my best to prevent Irma hearing, or seeing; and in this I was successful.

My escort had been pressed away from the carriage, and the people surged around, yelling and screaming in their dismay; only for a minute, as the horses of the Guards thrust them heavily aside, and once more took their places round the carriage. I heard Woolgast's voice:

"Your Majesties are safe, unhurt? Ah, God be praised!"

"Both quite unhurt, but get one of the other carriages here quickly."

I clambered on to the box seat of the carriage, and shouted at the top of my voice that we were unhurt, and that those who heard must pass the news on, and also let us through. My voice must have been heard by many, for a very little time elapsed before my mother's coach was at our side. For one instant her arms were round my neck, and then they were assisting Irma in beside her.

My darling's face was white, but she smiled bravely at me as they drove off. Then I took one of the trooper's horses, and was just about to mount when it struck me that some one might have been injured. I asked Woolgast, and his face was grave as he told me that two of the people had been killed, and three Guardsmen injured. I gave what orders were necessary, and, sad with a sadness the like of which I had never felt before, I mounted and rode on.

What a terrible change had come over the day! From the most joyous mirth, it had turned to the most gloomy despair. All those cheering multitudes how had only sorrowful looks to bestow upon their King. I rode therefore in almost complete silence, and I am afraid that I myself was as dejected a monarch as anyone could see, for the horror of the tragedy had struck me hard, and I could not forget that blood had been spilt almost on the bridal robe of my Queen. During that slow journey through the serried ranks of my subjects, who stood uncovered in mute sympathy, I tried to find some reason for the awful action; I knew of no one who could bear me personally any grudge. The nobles whom I had exiled had returned

to their estates long before, without any confiscations, and I did not believe that any of them could be guilty.

Those of my subjects who had suffered under Ivan had had their wrongs righted with far more celerity than they could have expected. These, too, I judged were guiltless; and, as I could think of no one whom I had injured, I put the crime down as the work of an anarchical fanatic with a loathing for monarchical government.

The only thought which brightened me was that my wife had given proofs of her love, by trying to screen me.

I had seen many terrible sights during the late war, but had never been so affected as I was now, it seemed so useless and unnecessary. I feared, too, that Irma would be quite stricken down by the shock, for it must have been a terrible strain on her nervous system, to be so quiet and brave through the whole affair.

My mother's carriage had reached the Palace some time before I did, so that the confusion, which no doubt existed, had had time to quieten down. This was largely due to the efforts of Zeula, who had forced his way through the crowds, and arrived at the Palace by side streets.

He was terribly upset, but he had the presence of mind to order for me the thing which I badly needed, a stiff brandy and soda. With all the haste that I could make, I went to see my wife, whom I found in my mother's care, and that meeting was a revelation to me; I had had no idea of the extent of her love. I think that the tears she shed were probably the most beneficial way of relieving her pent-up emotion, at any rate she recovered sufficiently to take her place by my side to show ourselves to the crowds which stood anxiously outside. I am not a believer in the adage that "out of evil cometh good," but in this case it certainly did, for the people had been struck by her demeanour, and were proud of their new Queen, a feeling which soon turned to love, as they got to know her better.

I shall never forget the graciousness of her manner to the Head of the Police when he came to tender his resignation. Many people were blaming him for the occurrence, even some of the Ministers. The poor fellow broke down completely, when Irma, having asked my permission to deal with his case, refused absolutely to hear of his resignation, and declared that there should be no one made scape-goat for an incident which could not have been foreseen. She made a point, too, of letting others see her friendly attitude towards the official, with so much grace and tact, that he went away happy, and quite devoted to his new Queen.

I had caused inquiries to be made concerning the two murdered men, one a baker of Karena, the other a peasant from near Bavla; the latter case was extremely sad, for he had walked, with his newly-wed wife, all the way from his village to the capital, to see us; it was their bridal treat, their honeymoon, and what an ending! The only thing I could do, was to provide handsomely for their dependents.

The three Guardsmen, who luckily were only slightly injured, received promotion and a sum of money. As for the criminal, it was never discovered who he was, although everything was done to find out his name, and to know whether he had accomplices. I believe myself that the whole affair was the work of his own disordered brain, and that he planned and executed his project entirely by himself. Mr. Neville, however, advanced a theory, which may have had some foundation, and which led to a confession from him.

It was the same day, only very much later, when, having dined *en famille*, I went with Prince Zeula and Mr. Neville into my study to talk the affair over. I had given orders that it should not be mentioned before my wife, as the sooner it was forgotten by her the better, a course of conduct which my mother emphatically endorsed, and it was into her care that I had given Irma.

I had waited behind to kiss a last good night to my wife, so that Zeula and Mr. Neville had time to reach my study, where they waited. It was then that I heard Mr. Neville say:

"I think it would be wise to tell him."

"What is that?" I asked.

"Neville has a theory," said Zeula.

"But only a theory, there is absolutely nothing to connect the two things."

"Which two things, what are you talking about?"

"Well, Victor, I will tell you. I hope, however, that you will not take it amiss. It is this: you remember the writer of a certain article in a Sonale paper; I was wondering whether he had had anything to do with the affair of to-day."

"I don't follow you."

"Well, you see, it was I who thrashed him, and I was wondering whether he had found out who I was and so implicated you. Perhaps he thought that I was acting for you."

"I'm damned! So it was you who forestalled me, was it? That's where you had gone when I could get no trace of you that day, I'm glad it was you and nobody else, but how did you know about it at all?"

"I told him, Victor; and, as I myself could not go, he was only too happy to volunteer."

"But why go at all?"

They did not answer me; and after a minute I smiled, and held out my hands to the two of them.

"I don't mind confessing now that you were right, and I am glad that I did not have to do it."

There was evident relief in their voices when they spoke again, asking me what I thought of the theory.

"I don't think that he is responsible. Of course he may be, but I think it

unlikely; still, if you think proper, you could have some discreet inquiries made by the police."

* * * * *

The next day my wife and I departed on our honeymoon, and for ten days we forgot everything. We had elected to spend our time, hidden from the world, in a castle in Soctia near the sea-coast. It was one of the Royal residences, which had not been used for years, and which before then had served more as a hunting-lodge than as a Palace. It was an old château, with many towers and turrets, delightfully picturesque, and undoubtedly uncomfortable. I had had this place put into thorough repair, and thither we went with just as small a retinue as we could well take.

I did not think it was possible for a human being to feel so happy, at times it seemed to choke me. Irma was all that my mind could conceive, or my heart desire; there was between us the most perfect understanding, as though our lives had been lived together through countless centuries. Each seemed to know instinctively the wishes and thoughts of the other, and our minds intermingled smoothly and perfectly. There were, apparently, no rough edges to be worn off.

We refused to think of state matters, during that short period; and, when the courier arrived each day with letters from Prince Zeula, it was only as if I had dreamt of such things, and they were forgotten before he had gone from our sight with the replies.

The country around the château was some of the most beautiful to be found in Rudarlia, and some days we spent the sunny hours in riding out exploring, as free from care as two children. Then, in the evenings, we would sit on the terrace which we liked most and watch the night.

I wonder how many people know the charm and understand the mystery of a warm summer's evening. I daresay a great number, but it seemed to us that nobody but ourselves could properly appreciate it, as, sitting side by side on a stone bench, we would watch the last lights die out in the sky, and the mantle of night descend on nature.

The sounds, too, fascinated us, those mysterious murmurings for all the world like those of a slumbering child. We spoke seldom, preferring to sit hand in hand, in silence, until the moon crept into view, showing us, as it were, another world--quiet, peaceful, silvery, and almost more enchantingly beautiful than the day.

We were, no doubt, absurd, but I am glad to think that we were, that in spite of strenuous lives before us--and in my case behind as well--we could still forget everything in each other's love, and look out on the world with the pleased,

expectant eyes of children; I believe we could imagine fairies in the depths of the forest, or nymphs playing in the streams.

It was on the eleventh day of our stay in this place, that we received notification that the outside world did really exist; we were brought back abruptly to our everyday senses, by the sight of a number of men toiling up a somewhat steep hill which led to the château. We were on the top of one of the towers, and from there had an extensive view of the surrounding country.

"Oh, Victor, look at those people! Do you think they want to see us? because if so I must go and arrange my hair."

A remark which might lead people to imagine that the King of Rudarlia was a very ordinary young husband after all.

The men in question did wish to see us, for presently we were informed that a deputation from a neighbouring village desired to pay us their respectful homage.

"This is the beginning of the end, my Queen, and how little do those honest fellows know with what thoughts we watched their approach. Of course, I might order their heads to be cut off; but, if I did, no one would do it, so you see how impotent your husband really is."

"Poor fellows, they must be very hot and thirsty, and I think it is charming of them to come all this way to see us."

"So do I, but I did not wish to be disturbed."

"Nor did I, there are such beautiful views from up here."

As we had spent most of the time looking at each other, hers was a remark which made me laugh, which she had probably intended.

Some twenty minutes later, Irma and I appeared on the terrace where the men had assembled. They were to my mind very brave, and tried manfully to hide their nervousness. One of them, who wore the sash of Mayor, advanced towards us with many bows.

He was, he informed us, the Mayor of the village, and had been begged by a number of citizens to head a deputation, which desired to express their joy at our escape, and to thank us for the honour we did them by choosing their province, and their part of the province to stay in, etc., etc.

He ended a speech, which must have taken him a long time to learn by heart, by very gracefully begging us to accept a trifling token of their loyalty, in the shape of two small silver articles made by the village metal worker.

He handed me two boxes, in one of which was a really beautiful brooch of silver and turquoise matrix, and in the other a box, almost equally beautiful, of the same materials.

Both Irma and myself were absolutely amazed at the artistic merit of these things, as well as at the cleverness of the workmanship.

I turned to the Mayor, who stood by seeking to read in our faces our opinion of the gift; he could not have found much difficulty, for both of us were literally astounded.

"Did you say these were made in your village?"

"Yes, your Majesty, by my nephew, a young man who does nothing else."

"I should like to see him, these works of his are very good indeed."

"He is here, may it please your Majesty."

"Present him to me."

A young fellow, assisted by sundry nudges, detached himself from the group behind the Mayor, and stood respectfully hat in hand.

"Are you the metal worker responsible for these?"

"Yes, your Majesty."

"Then let me tell you that you have a great gift, and that the Queen and I accept them with very much pleasure. When you go, leave your name and address, so that I may send for you."

Irma had pinned on the brooch, and was talking to the Mayor; so I moved over to the other men and shook hands with all, thanking them for their kind thoughts of us, complimenting them on possessing so skilful a craftsman in their village, and assuring them that we should never forget their visit.

One of them--an old man--told me that he had seen the marriage procession of my parents, but that ill-health had prevented him seeing mine. However, he thanked God for allowing him to see me and my beautiful Queen before he died; and he hoped that his sons would see my sons married. The good man was slightly previous, and wonderfully loyal.

CHAPTER XIX

When the deputation had seen enough of us, and refreshed themselves mightily, they went away much pleased with the result of their visit. I am sure that some of them would remember all their lives that they had spoken to their King and Queen; it would give them something to talk about in their old age, as well as a feeling of importance amongst their less fortunate fellows.

It is a wonderful thing that rarity should add so much to the value of anything.

When we were alone again, Irma and I began to re-examine the two gifts,

but, strangely enough, both of us were silent as though in thought. It may have been the art shown in the work, or it may have been something which I can never hope to explain, at any rate from that silent scrutiny sprang an idea, which in its maturity was a source of many emotions. From a little thing, like the visit of that day, a great thing sprang forth, and incidentally my life was expanded.

I had a nebulous scheme, a thought hardly formed, somewhere in my brain, as I stood and looked at the brooch and box; and it required the feminine quickness to supply the concrete expression of it. My wife said:

"The art of Rudarlia, what might it become?"

"You had better tell me what you are thinking," I said.

"I am thinking that Rudarlia may be famous for its art life, if you care to make it so."

"But I know so little of art. The only knowledge I have of the subject is entirely superficial; I've never had time to study it as it should be studied."

"Grey-haired Monarch."

"Is my wisdom so great?"

"No, oh King! that was not my thought."

"But do you think that I shall ever have time to study the question? You must remember that here in Rudarlia we have none of the great collections that other countries have. One small gallery is all that Karena boasts of."

"Can you give me a reason why she should not have more?"

"Not if you say that she is to have."

"Oh, Victor, let us spend this evening planning out what we might do, or rather what we can."

So that evening we sat on the terrace as usual, and instead of wasting the time--if it can be so harshly described--we tried to work out some way of encouraging art in Rudarlia. It was a most puzzling question, for there was always the danger of overdoing the assistance we could give to artists, as well as the chance of offending their susceptibilities by what they might look upon as charity; they are so very difficult to tackle, these people with artistic temperaments.

It was, however, a most interesting conversation, during which I discovered that my wife had much more knowledge of the subject under discussion than I had; and later I found that she herself was very fond of dabbling in various mediums, with a considerable amount of success.

We practically decided that night to found a colony devoted to the arts in Karena, and I knew just whereabouts that colony would have its quarters.

There was considerable risk, to my mind, in this idea of ours. Art to a nation is, I suppose, almost a necessity in some shape or other, but it must be controlled, either by the artists themselves or by the force of public opinion. Now in Karena, which we proposed to make the heart of our art world, public opinion was prac-

tically *non est*. The reasons for this being the want of wealth, and the want of artists. I should have felt much more secure with regard to our scheme, if I had been certain that the people really needed the fine arts to assist them in living.

I was quite well aware that the growth of proper appreciation must be very gradual, and it seemed to us that the chief point was how to lay the foundations well. It was no good thinking of taking the few Rudarlians who called themselves artists, and giving them unlimited paint, or clay, or pianos, to work their own sweet will upon, for that must lead to either rank imitation, or work of the crudest kind. We should thus be obtaining no benefit, for there were many worthless daubs to be seen, although not all by Rudarlians.

Our honeymoon drew to a close, two weeks of the most perfect joy that I have ever known; it was so, because I had nothing to do except devote myself to Irma, afterwards it was never quite the same, as I had other things to attend to.

For a little time after our return nothing was done about our scheme, that is, nothing definite, but all the while we were both working out, to the best of our ability, the details.

I had known just whereabouts I wished the art settlement to be, but it was only owing to the death of the man who owned the place that I was able to buy it.

The property I speak of was at the back of the Palace, and consisted of the most ancient houses in the city. These houses were practically cut off from the rest of Karena; on one side by the Palace walls, or rather those of the grounds, on another by an extraordinary outcropping of rock, while on the third--for the whole was in the form of a triangle--ran a small canal.

The only way of getting to this place was by means of a bridge over the canal, unless one climbed the walls of my gardens, or was lowered from the top of the rock. This place therefore was a perfect nest, and really ideal for our settlement.

How it had remained so, untouched by the spirit of modernity, was always a puzzle to me. The moment the bridge over the canal was crossed, I felt as though I had stepped from the twentieth into the fifteenth century. I do not believe there was a single modern building in the place; everywhere one looked, it was mediæval.

I remember the first time that we went there after having purchased it, just Irma, my mother, Mr. Neville, and myself, and we enjoyed it thoroughly. There had been few people living in the houses, which had not been cared for, and these few were only too pleased to turn out of their quarters for a consideration.

We therefore found the place absolutely deserted, save for a few pigeons, and cats who would not desert their old haunts.

The doors of most of the houses had been left unlocked, so we went round the narrow cobbled streets, entering those buildings which seemed most desirable;

some were really fine houses, with large rooms containing great carved beams, leaded lights, and other delightful things. Naturally, the outsides were in keeping, and no matter where we looked we could see old door-ways, queer gargoyles, and little courtyards, the walls of which would in all probability be covered with lichen. In some parts, we seemed to be walking in a tunnel, so close were the houses to one another, and occasionally, at the end of these streets, we caught sight of the sunlit canal. I was very, very pleased with my purchase.

As we walked and examined, we explained to my mother and Mr. Neville what we proposed doing.

I think that at first she, or rather they, thought that marriage had made me a little mad; but as my explanation grew, both in length and conciseness, they began to think that after all something might be said for our idea. I told them that the houses should remain as they were, but with modern improvements, and that when the necessary alterations had been effected I proposed inviting artists of all kinds to come and live there: painters, sculptors, composers, engravers, writers, and metal workers. I then went on to draw most alluring visions of what I hoped would be the result. I pictured all these various artists living here much as they did in towns in the middle ages, working with the certainty that any really meritorious piece of art would be more thought of than a dozen inferior works, and that appreciation, consideration, and understanding would go hand in hand with profit.

Then I went on to tell them how I proposed having a gatehouse erected at the canal bridge, and instal some old pensioner and family in it.

"And how about feeding your colony?" asked Mr. Neville.

"I intend having just a few shops, and shall have one inn; that old place with the big hall, I think it will do as the dining-hall for unmarried artists."

"Where do you propose obtaining the artists you speak of?"

"I don't know yet, but I do not think there will be much difficulty in getting them to come here. I shall try the great art centres first, and then the smaller ones; I shall invite the famous men to stay for as long as they wish, and execute some splendid piece of work for Rudarlia."

"Yes, Victor is going to have his portrait painted in the uniform of each of his regiments; all the paintings will be collected in one building, which will be called The Hall of the King, and I shall be expected to spend so many hours a day there as a dutiful wife." A remark strangely flippant for a newly-married Queen to make.

My mother laughed, which was wrong of her, and said quietly:

"From what I know of the portraits of Royalty, all the works would be so much unlike each other that they would have to bear an identification tablet."

"How nice! I can imagine that I have ever so many different husbands, and

so need not get tired of one."

"I can see that this will lead to a family quarrel, so will turn the subject," said Mr. Neville.

"You need not trouble," laughed my fond parent. "Victor will do that himself, by letting loose a herd of wild artists in this peaceful community."

"Another thing that I shall do," I said, "is this: no Royal person shall be allowed to come here without a special permit."

"He would keep us out of Eden," murmured Irma.

"Zeula with a brush full of paint shall keep the entrance."

That was from Mr. Neville, so as I had them all against me I surrendered.

Now that we had possession of this place, it was not many weeks before the workmen were in, for we did not want to lose time, being both young enough to feel excited about our plans. I think it must be one of the most terrible things in life, to lose the power of feeling excited. My respect for architects grew enormously during the next few weeks, they knew so much that I did not; for instance, it seemed to me the simplest thing in the world to put pipes and things into a house to conduct water from the main, but it appeared to be more difficult than I imagined, and much discussion was necessary. I could not understand why, when there was a blank wall, I could not have a window knocked through it, and I finally came to the conclusion that a statesman of one of the great powers--the Foreign Minister of England, for example--does not have to be more careful than an architect knocking a window in a blank wall, so as not to disturb the balance of power.

Unless we had seen it ourselves we should never have believed that there was so much to be done in the place. It was almost staggering, and yet all the repairs and alterations were absolutely necessary; there were rooms to be converted into studios, and workshops and a hundred smaller alterations. It was a most wonderful hobby for both of us, not to speak of many others who were interested in a lesser degree. I think Zeula was almost as keen as we were, he spent hours in the vicinity; he had liked the idea the moment he had heard of it, and had immediately offered his services in any way we could use them. Another person who spent much of his spare time there was Bauen, he could generally be found keeping a watchful eye upon the workmen, and no doubt yarning with them, and telling those who wished, wonderful tales of their King.

I had had a gate made in the wall of the Palace gardens, and Irma and I used to go down when the workmen had finished for the day, to see what progress had been made, and what new arrangements we could suggest. Then the day came when there was enough done to allow us to begin filling our nest with birds.

This we did slowly, with much deliberation, and with the assistance of some of the great artists of the world, who most kindly offered to help us. From reports

which I received indirectly from the large centres, I caused a list to be made of those artists to whom should be sent an invitation to come to Karena. They were not all famous--in fact, there were only a few to whom that term might be applied--but they were all of an artistic calibre which made it possible for them to become so.

From Rudarlia I had a goodly few, who were eager to profit by the wonderful chance which this scheme of ours offered them, and the great men were ever ready to take them into their studios, to instruct and assist them. I had never realised how much goodness there was among artists until then, I had always looked upon them as essentially selfish people; but then I had known very few, and those, perhaps, bad examples. It was a lesson to me not to misjudge a class by a few specimens. I fear one is rather given to so doing.

It was wonderful to watch the beginning of a settlement, the incoming, the furnishing, and the gradual fall in the excitement; each new-comer took his own time to get used to the place, and artists might be seen all about Karena, gazing and exploring, but soon the first batch had settled down, and work was commenced.

From that time my education advanced along artistic lines, and I began to understand something of the innermost strivings of those men who were adding to the beauty of the world.

Most days, I managed to visit the place for half an hour or so, and when possible Irma accompanied me. Without any fuss or preparation we went to this studio, or that workshop, and were greeted everywhere with smiles, for these good people learnt to look upon us as friends, and were always pleased to show us anything which they thought might interest us; occasionally we made some little purchase, occasionally we gave some bigger commission.

There was one building reserved for exhibitions of paintings and drawings, another for the crafts, while a large hall was generally full of sculpture. These formed a permanent exhibition, although the work exhibited was not always the same, as each month the artists had the right to change their works there for others, and replace any that had been sold.

This exhibition was a source of great interest to Karenians, and others; indeed, most visitors who came to the city were anxious to see the work accomplished by my artists, as both Irma and myself called them, and many of these visitors went away with purchases and few of them apparently regretted the money spent.

We set the fashion of giving works of art as presents, and I am glad to be able to state that the fashion remains in full favour.

The other artistic professions were not neglected, there being studios set aside for musicians of all kinds, but I found it more difficult to arrange a plan whereby the pecuniary side of their work might benefit. I therefore arranged

that each week a concert should be given, and also that there should be a certain season when any of the masters might give grand opera, the players, of course, being the students. Karena boasted of an opera house; and, although I do not pose as an authority, I believe the musical side of the Rudarlian life was rather highly developed before this settlement came into being.

Some six months after the place was in full working order, one of the famous European artists, who happened to be staying as my guest, and who was full of enthusiasm for the scheme, suggested that the lack of old masters in Karena was a serious handicap for the students. I questioned him closely on the subject, heard all he had to say, and then interrogated others; the greater number agreed that a collection of the works of the famous masters would be of incalculable value to the artists generally.

This was a new idea, and I must confess that it appealed to me; I think that I wanted Karena to be able to boast also of a National Gallery, but there were many things to be thought of before this could be undertaken. The greatest difficulty was procuring the works themselves, how was that possible even though I should desire it; many pictures are sold as old masters, but there must be many fakes among them. Another thing was the expense; I had no wish to invest a large sum of money in pictures, for in a newly developing country like mine there were countless other ways of spending money, with infinitely more advantage to the nation. What I finally did was this: I let it be known all over Rudarlia that I would provide a gallery, if the Rudarlians themselves would provide the pictures, either as gifts to the nation or as loans.

The result surprised me, I had had no idea that the artistic scheme which Irma and I had originated had so taken the public fancy; but it appeared that it had, and almost immediately I received notification that there were a large number of nobles and others who would consider it an honour to have their old pictures hung in the National Gallery in Karena. It must have astonished many people to know that Rudarlia had many authentic works of the great masters, men like Rubens, Rembrandt, and Titian, stowed away in various old castles and châteaux. These were offered generously by their owners, some as gifts, others as loans, so I perforce had to keep to my promise and provide a suitable building for the housing. This expense I looked upon as a most legitimate one, for it gave work to a number of men, thus circulating money among the working class, added to the beauty of Karena, and incidentally added to the value of the city as an art centre.

In building this gallery, I was determined to employ only Rudarlian brains, labour, and materials, and so the first thing I did was to open a competition among Rudarlian architects, all over the country, for the best design for the proposed gallery.

I did not judge these myself, but left the decision to a famous French archi-

tect who was staying in Karena. I found that his choice was much the same as Irma's and mine, so that design was decided upon, and the architect who had submitted it was awarded the prize. Strange to say, he was an absolutely unknown man from a small town in Garace. The next thing, was to decide upon the builder, but this I left to others to think about.

We had chosen a site in an excellent position, near the Palace, and therefore close to the settlement; and it was with a feeling almost akin to awe that Irma laid the foundation stone. She told me of this feeling and asked me to explain it, which was more than I could do, but I did suggest that she was fearful of the effect the gallery might have on the Rudarlians.

At last the building was completed. What a day that was, it is simply burnt upon my memory with ineffaceable delight, not because we were going to open a National Gallery of Art, not because we had accomplished something for Rudarlia, but because upon that day Irma told me something; told me shyly, yet with a deep, wonderful pride, that I was to be a father.

We had then been married for three years, and I think that all the nation worried that no child had been born to us. In my heart, I, too, had been rather despondent, for so much hung upon our having a family, and more powerful still was my desire to hold my own child in my arms.

I believe that all those who came in contact with me that day thought that I was a little too exhilarated at thoughts of opening a gallery; they put it down to that, poor dears, not knowing what the real reason was. In all probability, a thousand husbands feel just the same every time such news is broken to them, but then I would not have allowed that; I was bursting with pride, and an insane desire to take every one into my confidence.

What an absurd thing young human nature is, that is, when it is natural and nice--and I was both.

I remember nothing of the opening ceremony, except that various speeches were made and a great number of people cheered themselves hoarse when Irma and I appeared. Irma told me afterwards, so did Mr. Neville, so did Zeula, so did my mother, that my speech convulsed every one who heard it; that I had appeared in a new rôle: that of a wit. I should never have believed them, had they not made me read the report of what I had said, which appeared in the newspaper. It certainly was humorous, but I have never attempted to repeat it, rather luckily, too, in my opinion.

It was in connection with this gallery, that I instituted a new Order in Rudarlia: the Order of Merit.

Ever since my accession, I had been thinking in a half-hearted fashion of doing so, but now I made up my mind that such an Order would be most useful to reward those Rudarlians who served the state in either a direct or indirect manner.

I wished if possible to widen the area of such a distinction, not only to confine it to the professions. Any man who by his labour served Rudarlia might be entitled to receive the Order, but the different labours must be kept apart from one another; I mean, by that, that a soldier wearing the Order must be distinguishable from the great lawyer, and so on. This I did by using different coloured ribbons. All men with the right to wear the distinction were to be known as Chevalier. They and their wives had also the right to appear at Court.

For this I received some abuse, no doubt, but I shall always maintain that class distinction, based on birth alone, is a mistake, and calculated to work a tremendous amount of mischief. That a man who employs thousands of other men to make articles, or raise food, for the nation, should be looked down upon by those whose ancestors fought for their country and were ennobled is wrong.

So many people do not realise that national service is not necessarily performed only by fighting. And those same people do not realise that times have changed; they do not wish to advance with the civilisation of their country, never thinking that the rich man of to-day may be the founder of a noble family which shall do much for the honour and advancement of their land. I do not deny, however, that the said noble family may, in a hundred years or so, look down and sneer at their less highly placed neighbours; but then human nature is very funny if you think about it, and extremely illogical.

There must be expansion in everything, and in such a country as Rudarlia, where classes exist, I hold that the noble class is all the stronger and better for the introduction into its ranks of all types of brains, that is, of course, the finer types; I do not suggest criminal types, or fools, or even sentimentalists, for as a rule such types are not unknown among the denizens of the aristocracy in all countries. It was my wish, therefore, to obtain this fresh blood in the titled families by choosing recruits from the ranks of those who had achieved.

For the first few months that followed the opening of the gallery, I do not believe there ever was a happier monarch than myself. It became almost a disease, and, strange to say, nearly all those who surrounded me caught the complaint. My mother at thought of possessing a grandchild was almost delirious with joy. Zeula was worse; he began to talk to me upon every occasion when we were alone about my heir, and to wonder about his education, his names, every conceivable thing which could be imagined. And I liked it, and encouraged him. At first we were both prone to talk as though the sex of the child were known; we always spoke of it as masculine, until Mr. Neville put us right by suggesting mildly that it might happen to be a girl, he had heard of such cases, he said. I will own that at his remark both Zeula and myself were rather taken aback, but after the first few minutes we went on quite calmly making our plans for a girl. Oh, the castles in the air we all built, and what a fascinating pastime it was.

About this time I had a letter from Carruthers. I have it still, occasionally I read it as an antidote, for it brings back something which I might with reason wish to forget. I used to take--and do still, for that matter--great pride in being beloved by my people, and I used to flatter myself that there was no one who could come and say to me, with truth, "Look at my misery, the result of this or that action of yours." Once before, on the day of my marriage, I had experienced a severe shock to this pride of mine, but now I was as bad as ever. The second shock, however, opened my eyes to the fact that a king can always find some one who believes that the monarch has used him ill. So it was in my case.

Carruthers' letter ran:

"MY DEAR OLD SPLOSH,

"A very curious thing has happened, which has caused me a lot of worry.

"Last week I received a letter from a woman whose name is unknown to me, asking for an interview. She informed me that what she wanted to tell me was serious, and might affect you. I saw her. The interview was interesting; as she appears to look upon you as some one divine, I did not disabuse her mind. She told me that you had assisted her to return home to England after Ivan's death, and other things, one of which was, that having heard my name used in connection with yours, she imagined that I could tell you her tale more easily than she could herself. It was this: A man had been to her farm for work, and had in the course of his stay uttered many threats against you as the cause of his downfall. From what he said the woman seemed to think that he was an illegitimate son of the late Ivan, and who had been left destitute on his father's death. She described him as being a very powerful man, dark, with a fierce wild expression. The details are meagre enough, but look out for such a man, see if your Ministers know of him. Don't take risks by ignoring this, for I am convinced that the woman was absolutely genuine. I've a jolly good mind to chuck the army, and come and look after you myself."

I did not ignore this warning, I spoke to Zeula, Woolgast, and the head of the police about it, but I fettered them by binding them to secrecy, as I did not wish the slightest rumour to reach Irma's ears. Having spoken to these men, I must confess that the warning faded from my memory; luckily, the others did not forget so easily. They, it seemed, had an anxious time. Zeula told me that before Ivan had usurped the throne he had had a son by a peasant woman, but this child had

disappeared.

CHAPTER XX

Herr Bjornston, the eminent Swedish sculptor, to this day blames himself mightily for what happened; so do Woolgast, the Chief of Police, Prince Zeula, Mr. Neville, and others, whereas the only person to blame is myself, and I don't blame myself over-much. Perhaps I was negligent, since I had been warned; it may have been conceit on my part not to take precautions, but, as I have already stated, I knew of no one who bore me a grudge with reason.

On this occasion I had, as was my habit, gone alone to the settlement to pass an hour before settling down to a bout of work with Zeula. I did not know then that, every time I did this, my dear old servant Bauen kept me under surveillance. He always shadowed me from the Palace to the settlement, watched where I entered and waited patiently until I reappeared; so often had he done this that he knew I never stayed more than fifteen minutes in any studio. It is to this knowledge of his that I owe my life.

It was a glorious evening, and I wandered down to the house in which Herr Bjornston had his studio. How wonderful it is that everything seems mapped out in life; I remember hesitating on the door-step, undecided whether to go in there or to some other studio. I was in two minds whether I should not go to a young Englishman's place to order a small picture which I wanted to give away, but I decided that the morrow would do for that, as the artist might be out; I therefore rapped at Bjornston's door.

It was flung open, and I stepped in. The door was closed behind me. I was in what was perhaps the finest studio in the place, a really magnificent room, but it was empty save for the man who had admitted me and myself.

"Is not Herr Bjornston in, then?" I asked.

"I expect him every minute, your Majesty. He had a message which called him away an hour ago; he told me that he would return at half-past nine."

I looked at my watch, it was already past the quarter.

"You think he will return then?"

"Undoubtedly, your Majesty; Herr Bjornston is never late."

"Then I will wait."

There was a wooden chair placed near a table upon which was a lamp and

various sketch-books, so I sat down and commenced to turn some pages at random. I had not given any particular attention to the man who had admitted me, but glancing at him casually I noticed that his eyes were covered or rather veiled by a green shade; he was a bearded, thick-set fellow. He advanced towards me with a portfolio in his hands.

"Perhaps your Majesty might be interested in these sketches?"

"Thank you," I said, smiling. "You suffer with your eyes?"

"Nothing serious, your Majesty, a trifle weak, that is all."

"I have not seen you before, have I?"

"I only came here last week, your Majesty."

"You assist Herr Bjornston perhaps?"

"He was kind enough to give me employment when one of his regular men fell sick."

"Oh, indeed, you are not a student then?"

"I was once, your Majesty; but fortune deserted me, and I became through necessity a labourer."

"That is sad, perhaps your luck may improve in the future."

"I hope so, your Majesty."

"What made you come to Karena?"

"I had heard of your Majesty's generosity to all artists, and thought that there might be work for me. I always like to be at work in some studio."

"Have you any of your own efforts with you?"

"Unfortunately, no, your Majesty."

"Well, we must see what you can do; there is always room for talent here."

"I thank your Majesty most sincerely."

I opened the portfolio, and the man withdrew. The sketches were of absorbing interest, most of them being the slight personal things an artist sometimes values more than his finished pictures. All were good; evidently Herr Bjornston had spent a great many years getting them together, as some of them were dated ten or twelve years previously. Most of them bore signatures famous throughout the world. I was so interested that I forgot all about the time, and it was only when I had looked at the last sketch, that I remembered, and pulled out my watch—good heavens, it was a quarter to ten! I closed the portfolio, and sat back in the chair to push it away from the table. Herr Bjornston was very late in spite of his man's assurances; still, it did not matter, I had had a pleasant visit, and there was nothing of importance that I wished to say to him.

Something seemed to be entwining my feet. I bent forward to see what it was, and immediately was pulled violently back into the chair. My surprise was so great that for a moment I could do nothing, and that moment was the finishing touch to my undoing, for the noose which had been slipped over my shoulders

was pulled tight and fresh coils made round me; then I felt my feet being drawn together and realised that I was helpless.

I turned my head round and glared at my assailant, but the sight of his eyes--which he had now uncovered--caused Carruthers' warning to recur to me, and I understood without any further assault that I was in a devil of a fix.

"Untie these ropes at once."

"Your Majesty is pleased to jest."

"You will find it no jesting matter."

"You speak of the future; perhaps your Majesty will have a clearer vision to appreciate this position."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't quite know, never having been to the place to which your Majesty is going."

"Don't be foolish, my man; untie this rope and I will be lenient with you."

He drew up another chair in front of me and sat gazing into my eyes. I returned stare for stare, but I will confess to feeling very much afraid. The situation was so very unpleasant. What a fool I had been not to take precautions, I should have known that all of Ivan's breed were dangerous. I was flabbergasted, I did not know what to say to the fellow, what argument can one use to a madman? More important still was how to get away, how to be rescued, for it was quite impossible for me to loosen the ropes that bound me. I could call for help, but no one would hear me. Still, there was always a chance that some one would; so I let out a yell that ought to have awakened the settlement.

Unfortunately it did not; and the only good I got from it was a gag, which effectively put an end to my making sufficient noise to attract attention. Luck was against me, for only a few minutes after the gag had been applied some one rapped at the door. I tried hard to make some kind of appeal for assistance, but it was futile, and I had to sit there and listen to the knocking. Presently the person, whoever it was, gave up, and with a sinking heart I heard the sound of his footsteps dying away.

The man still sat facing me, with a beastly smile on his lips; no doubt he was overjoyed to see my struggles. Presently, however, he began to speak in a low voice hardly above a whisper; and somehow that added to the horror of my position.

"I am glad I stopped your mouth in time; it would have hurt me to have finished everything before you have realised things more fully. And if my time had been cut short by any interruption from outside, your Majesty would naturally never have known all that I intend telling you, all those details which will make your journey to Paradise so pleasant.

"Have you any preference as to where I should begin? Perhaps you would

like to know who I am. Well, that is soon told; I am the son of the man you had murdered, you did not know that Ivan the King had a son, did you? He had, perhaps more than one, for he was rather given to promiscuous love affairs; but only one need worry you--I shall be quite sufficient.

"I know how my father died, Prince Alexis told me; I know he was always a liar, but he told the truth about this. When I heard, I swore that you should pay for it. Since then your debt has been mounting up, for I was left destitute, and think how long that was ago, and imagine my misery all those years, having to do any manual labour that I could obtain, in order to keep from starving. You have to pay for all that.

"The most difficult thing I ever had to do was to keep my face from portraying my delight when you walked in so sweetly this evening. I have been trying to get near you for years, and at last luck has been kind to me; nothing could have worked out so well if it had been planned. To begin with, that old fool Bjornston is out for the night, out of Karena even, and the other two assistants are after their lady-loves. It is hardly likely that the two fair Karenians will allow them to return, or at any rate until our little business is over."

He stood up and moved away behind my chair, so that I could not see what he was doing; but I heard him moving about. Then he came back again, in his hands a rope, and at the end of the rope a heavy mass of stone.

"Do you see this, your Majesty, can you guess what it is for?"

I looked at it, then at him, and raising my eyebrows turned my head aside, then quickly back again. God! how lucky that he was examining the knot in the rope, for had he been looking at me he must have noticed my nervous start, a movement that I could not control, for I could have sworn that I had seen a face at the window. I shook my head from side to side, and caught another glimpse of the window, but there was no face there, and my spirits, which had gone bounding up, dropped like a stone. So, then, there was really no hope for me, there was no way out, and I was doomed to die just when life was at its fullest, just when the greatest of all my hopes was to be fulfilled. I turned sick with despair at the thought of the effect my disappearance would have upon my wife. The man was talking again:

"It will serve a good purpose, and keep you down nicely."

His cursed calmness caused the most beastly twinges of an unpleasant nature, which I can only call fear, I do not think there is anything to be ashamed of in confessing it. I was young and did not wish to die, and yet I must give no sign which would add to his delight, he must not perceive that I was frightened. I had strained at the rope which held me until I found that all my efforts seemed to make it tighter, and so I gave up and sat still to wait for death.

"I hope you have confessed yourself lately. Personally, I do not believe in

a God; but your Majesty has the reputation of being devout. Perhaps you have some little message you would like to leave; if that is the case you must give me your promise not to call out, and I will remove the gag; is it to be so?"

I nodded, there might be a chance if I could talk. I could at least try to bribe him, try to ransom myself. If he were not too mad, there might be a chance. His fingers were busy and a moment later I was free to talk.

He looked at his watch. By this time Prince Zeula must be awaiting me. I wondered what he would do--and Mr. Neville? They would never give up the search for me, my body would doubtless be discovered, but what good would that do me? None whatever.

"You will observe, your Majesty, that I have given you ample time to make your peace with your God. Would it please you to give me any message to deliver? I assure you that I will be a faithful messenger."

"You are determined then to murder me?"

"A rough word, surely your Majesty means execute."

"I give you my word that your father died a natural death."

"He naturally died, you mean."

"I mean what I said."

"Then, for the first time in my life, I call a King a liar to his face; it is quite an amusing sensation."

"I am not a liar; but no matter, now listen to me. You are going to murder me----"

"Execute."

"Execute, then, if you will. What I wish to know is--how will it benefit you, will you be any the less destitute? No! whereas if you allow me to ransom myself----"

"Ransom yourself? Well, I should have to dictate the terms."

"Of course, what are they?"

"The remaining years of your life." He laughed. "Now I think that is enough; what message do you wish to send?"

"A hundred thousand pounds would make you very comfortable for the rest of your life."

"But not as comfortable as your death."

"Two hundred thousand and no questions asked, with absolute freedom."

"No terms except the ones I mentioned. Come now, the message for the Queen; it is for her, eh? Not that it is much good, because you will be able to give it to her yourself in a little while."

"What do you mean?"

"Softly, softly! That was very like a shout, and remember you gave your word; my kind thought of sending your wife to you seems to have upset you

somewhat."

"You cursed devil!"

This was the final stroke, and I strained like a madman at my bonds. My head was turned away with the effort, and the window again came within my range of vision; but this time I closed my eyes, so that he could not read the hope which must have been in them. I could have shouted with the terrible exertion I had to make to avoid giving any sign, for the window, which before had been closed, was now wide open, and my old Bauen creeping through it. To this day, I cannot imagine how he had managed to open the window without betraying his presence. Another struggle, and through my half-opened eyes I saw Bauen come creeping slowly up behind. I realised that I must make as much noise as I could to hide any sound he might make, as he had only a knife, and the other his revolver.

"I will give you one minute more," I heard him say, and he began to count.

Ten--twenty--thirty--at ninety I toppled the chair over sideways, coming down with a crash, and losing sight of him. There was the sound of a terrific struggle on the other side of the table; the revolver barked three times, I felt a stinging in my leg and heard curses, the sound of blows, and moans. Then there was silence.

"Bauen, Bauen," I called.

"Your Majesty?" came the answer, to my joy.

"Are you hurt, Bauen, can you come and cut me free?"

"No, your Majesty, I cann----" There was a little sigh and then silence again.

A loud, insistent knocking at the door now drew my attention, and I raised my voice:

"Break down the door."

I lay quiet after that, and presently round the table crawled Bauen. He dragged his leg painfully, and his face was covered with blood; but he kept on until he reached my side, when he put his lips to my hand and rolled over motionless.

There was a tremendous crash, another, and the door flew open. For a moment those outside hesitated to enter, but when I called to them to cut me loose they swarmed in. Very carefully they lifted Bauen, and placed him on a settee in a corner of the studio.

The moment that I was free I gave orders for a surgeon to be sent for, also I gave orders that no one was to leave the settlement, for I did not wish any false rumour to reach the Palace.

The surgeon came almost before I could turn to see how Bauen was. A few minutes sufficed to allay my anxiety; his wounds were serious but not dangerous, and under the skilful treatment he received he recovered sufficiently to recognise me, and seeing me safe would, I knew, go a long way towards effecting his speedy recovery.

Ivan's son was dead, Bauen's knife had reached his heart. I cannot bring myself to feel the least pity for the man, he must have been bad to the core. His crime would have been carried out to a successful conclusion, had he not overlooked or forgotten one small incident. A barge had been moored up against the house to unload a big block of marble, otherwise Bauen could never have reached the window. As it was, upon obtaining no reply to his knocking, he had run along the bank of the canal and swum across to the barge, from where he could look into the room. Upon seeing my predicament, for a moment he had intended to raise the alarm, but, fearing that by doing so he might cause my instant death, he had resolved instead to try and rescue me himself, single-handed. His great fear had been that some noise would betray him; luckily for both of us it didn't, and he sprang, just as the man's finger was about to pull the trigger.

As soon as the surgeon had made Bauen comfortable, I got him to look at my own leg, and found that the ball had gone through the calf, a clean flesh wound which would heal without trouble. It had been a random shot, for the table-cloth had prevented my being seen, but it shows the terrible hatred that the man had borne me, for him to have wasted a shot on the off-chance of causing my death, and only a moment before Bauen's knife had done its work.

Directly I was bandaged, leaning on the arm of a student, I hobbled into the Palace gardens. I shall never forget the enthusiasm of the crowd--of every nationality--who had gathered in the settlement, to evince their joy at my escape; it was very nice to have the affection of all those good fellows. Luckily, I met Woolgast coming to seek me, Zeula having thought it necessary; into his hands I put the affair, but first I sent him back to the Palace to warn Zeula and others not to make a fuss when I appeared. I did not wish even the faintest hint of alarm to reach Irma's ears. This done, I fainted. It was perhaps unnecessary, but the strain of the evening had been great enough to try the nerves of a bull; I had also lost a quantity of blood.

And so it ended; the last adventure of a career which had not been an empty one. That is up to the present, for it only happened within the year in which I am writing. I think Bauen was the most honoured man in my realm for some time; before a stranger came to overthrow him, a little fellow with a lusty voice, and as Bauen never spoke much the new-comer naturally won. I may say that there were other reasons as well, one of which was that, God being willing, he would one day rule over Rudarlia.

Carruthers came to Karena for his christening; and I can remember that upon that occasion, when we all were dining together--my mother, Mr. Neville, Prince Zeula, all those whom I love--Carruthers proposed a toast:

"Victor II., the finest King Rudarlia ever had, Her Majesty Queen Irma, the finest Queen, and--er--I forget his name, but that jolly baby, the finest baby in the

world."

Then Irma said quietly:

"And Bauen, who saved them all."

Now, as this was a private dinner, there was a great deal of fun at the quiet way Irma had accepted Carruthers' compliments, only Zeula and Mr. Neville refusing to be consoled, because they had not been included as the finest Prime Minister and the finest Tutor.

That I should remember this incident is in no way strange, for it was only to-day that it happened.

Now I am seated in my study, I have said good night to every one, except Woolgast, who, as usual, is on duty. Presently I shall summon him and tell him to get to his bed; it is our regular custom, every night. I say a few words to him, and then dismiss him with:

"Well, good night, General."

And he always gives the same reply:

"Good night, God bless your Majesty!"

* * * * *

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THE MACDERMOTS OF BALLYCLORAN
THE SMALL HOUSE AT ALLINGTON (2 vols.)
THE THREE CLERKS
THE WARDEN

LONDON: JOHN LANE, THE BODLEY HEAD

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